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"KICK ME THROUGH THE DOOR! THERE'S NO MAN IN SLIDE-OUT BIG ENOUGH TO DO THAT!" CRIED THE FRESH.

OR,
The Big Racket at Slide-Out.

A Romance of Southwest Arizona.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "RICHARD TALBOT OF CINNABAR," "JOE PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GAME OF FREEZE-OUT.

In the office of the Red Dragon Mining Company, situated in the little mining-camp, so thoroughly described in our tale entitled "Blake, the Mountain Lion," sat two men, each a decided contrast to the other.

One was tall and muscular, dressed in an extremely "loud" fashion, with an abundance of flashy jewelry; a man with a hard face, deeply seamed with dark lines, and yet rather good-looking, for the features were regular, his eyes a brilliant jet-black in hue, his mustache and chin-beard luxuriant—they were the same hue as the eyes, as was also his hair, which curled in little

crispy ringlets, all over his head. He was a man of forty, or thereabouts, and gave indications of being a brilliant, dashy fellow.

This was General Washington Clairborne, a leading lawyer and prominent capitalist of the mining city known as Tombstone.

The gentleman who sat upon the opposite side of the table was Estervan Del Santo, one of the principal advocates and speculators of the old Mexican city of Durango. He was a man of slender build, with a long, dark, pointed face, high cheek-bones, and had he not been smoothly-shaven his features could have been well represented by the pictures of the Prince of Darkness when promenading upon the earth in his human form.

He was smooth, oily, eel-like; a man who could smile and murder while he smiled.

This pair, so opposite to each other in appearance, had come to this mining camp of Slide-Out upon the same errand.

Their ostensible business was to look after the interest of the creditors in the Red Dragon mining property.

The Marquis De Belleville, the French speculator, who developed the mine, had busted, "gone up the spout," to use the mining lingo, in the worst kind of way.

There were two sets of creditors, Mexicans in Durango, from whom, owing to the fact that the wife of the marquis was a Mexican woman, with relatives in the old Mexican city, De Belleville had procured loans to enable him to begin mining operations, and Americans in Tombstone, who had furnished supplies at first, and then, being impressed with the idea that the mine was a big thing, and the marquis had struck it extremely rich, loaned him money to put in improved machinery.

It was the old story.

The mine was a rich one, but the "lode" was not of that character that a man could hope to make a sudden fortune out of it.

In time it undoubtedly would be an extremely valuable property, but it was one of those mines that could be described by the old miner's saying, "thar's a million in it, but it will take a million to git it out."

"Now let us see just how we stand in this matter," the Tombstone lawyer remarked.

The table was covered with a litter of legal-looking papers, all relating to the affairs of the mine.

"Yes, then we can come to some decision in regard to our future movements," the Mexican observed.

"The marquis has given up everything into our hands, and it is my idea that we ought to be able to agree upon a course of action so as to keep the affair from getting into the courts. You and I ought to be the only lawyers to have a finger in the pie."

"Yes, that is my idea exactly."

"I think I have figured the thing out correctly," Clairborne remarked, taking up a sheet of paper upon which he had been figuring. "The mine is bonded for one hundred thousand dollars, one thousand shares at a par value of a hundred dollars each. You represent twenty-five thousand—"

"Excuse me—really, I own the shares outright," the Mexican interrupted. "You see my men in Durango did not have the confidence in this property that I had, and it is not strange, for they knew nothing at all about it, while I took the trouble to come up here with the marquis in the beginning and made a thorough examination of the mine before I went into the affair. I am no pigeon to be plucked in a mining speculation by even the keenest rascal. I have considerable experience in mining matters and believe I have skill enough to know a good thing when I see it."

"That is my case precisely."

"The men who joined in with me to advance the money were naturally alarmed by De Belleville's burst-up, and, of course, they immediately jumped to the conclusion that matters were a great deal worse than they really are."

"I understand; they became panic-stricken; my men in Tombstone were affected in the same way."

"They were rather inclined to blame me for having led them into the affair, and so, in order to still their clamors, I posed in the light of a man who was willing to take all the burden on his own shoulders, and, in the most magnanimous manner possible, I bought up the claims at from fifty to seventy-five per cent discount."

"The identical little game that I played on the Tombstone sharps!" exclaimed the general with a chuckle.

"So you see I do not merely represent the shares; I own them."

"That is the way I am situated also. The twenty-five thousand dollars that I represent I own as well as control," Clairborne remarked. "Francisco Gomes, the superintendent, is down for twenty thousand and Miss Catalina Blanco, the young lady who is some distant relative of De Belleville's wife, owns thirty thousand dollars worth. To sum it up; you and I hold one half the stock and Gomes and Miss Blanco the other half."

"Yes, and that rather ties our hands," the Mexican observed, thoughtfully. "We hold

five hundred shares and they the same; if we had five hundred and one, we could arrange matters to suit ourselves."

"Yes, that is the point; then we could proceed to reorganize the company, put me in as president and you as treasurer, levy an assessment of ten or twenty dollars a share, which would force the others to put up a few thousand dollars or lose their interest in the mine. In fine, play the game of 'freeze out' to the queen's taste."

"Yes, but lacking the one share we cannot do it."

"No, but my idea was to get Gomes to go in with us. He is a practical engineer, you know, and a good man; we need just such a man to run the mine, and the fact of his having a big interest in the property would be certain to make him look sharply after matters."

"Yes, that is true. We can freeze the girl out and divide her interest between us; that will be fifteen thousand apiece. No need of letting Gomes into that, you know."

"Certainly not!" the general exclaimed. "He may thank his lucky stars that we don't skin him, too. There he is now. I will call him in."

The general did so.

The superintendent was a medium-sized gentleman, whose dark skin, jet-black eyes and hair showed his Spanish blood.

He took a seat, and the Tombstone lawyer proceeded to explain:

"Mr. Del Santo and myself, who control the majority of the shares of the Red Dragon Mining Company, have come to the conclusion to reorganize the company. We propose to hold an election, put a gentleman about my size in as president, Del Santo for treasurer, and give you the position of general manager of the works, allowing you a liberal salary; in fact, we will let you name your own figures if they are anything in reason. Then we will put on an assessment of twenty dollars a share in order to raise money to start things ahead again. If it is not convenient for you to pony up the money, you can have all the time you like on it, but we will make all the rest of the shareholders toe the mark or else freeze 'em out."

"Miss Blanco will never be able to pay such an assessment as that in the world!" Gomes exclaimed, immediately.

"So much the worse for the young lady. I am sorry for her, but business is business, you know," the general replied.

"Oh, yes, business is business," Del Santo repeated, rubbing his hands together softly.

"She owns a large number of shares, two or three hundred, and such an assessment she could not hope to pay. I don't believe she has a dollar in the world. Since the death of Mrs. De Belleville she has been stopping at the hotel. The landlord came and invited her to come there. The girl, being innocent and unsuspecting, thought it an act of kindness and gladly accepted, but Perkins, the landlord, is a Yankee, and not the man to waste sympathy on a friendless girl. It was I that told him to make the offer, and I am paying the girl's board."

The lawyers looked surprised at this disclosure.

"It is the truth, gentlemen, and my reason for the action is soon told. I am in love with Miss Blanco, but she has never looked with a favorable eye upon my suit; but then, when the marquis was in power here, she was thought to be a rich heiress, and that made her proud and haughty. It was my idea, though, that after the blow fell upon her, and she was thrown friendless upon the world, she might change her mind in regard to me."

"My dear fellow, don't you see that this little assessment business is going to put the game right into your hand?" Clairborne cried. "The lady has not despaired, because, undoubtedly, she calculated upon getting some money out of her shares; but when she finds that unless she can raise five or six thousand dollars, she will lose them, the chances are a thousand to one that she will gladly listen to your wooing. For a young and beautiful girl like her, poverty has no charms."

"It is a lucky thing for you, Mr. Gomes!" Del Santo declared. "Thanks to this turn of fortune's wheel, you will be pretty sure to win the lady."

"Undoubtedly the game is yours if you play your cards for all they are worth!" the general declared. "Go in with us to reorganize the company; we can make a big thing out of the mine. The assessment business will make the lady come to her milk. Why, there isn't one woman out of ten thousand who would hesitate; on one hand poverty, on the other wealth."

"Will you give me an hour or two to reflect upon the matter?" Gomes asked.

"Certainly, my dear fellow, take all the time you want!" Clairborne exclaimed. "You might call upon the lady and gently hint about this matter, so you can get an idea how she feels in regard to it."

"Yes, I will do so," and then the Cuban withdrew.

"We shall nail him all right!" the Tombstone man declared.

"Oh, yes, and we stand a chance to make a big stake."

And then the two laughed merrily.

CHAPTER II.

CATALINA'S DECISION.

GOMES's mind was in a whirl as he came out of the office. The superintendent was not really a bad fellow at heart, but he was a slave to the passion that the lovely Catalina had inspired, and, like many another man since the world began, he was ready to do almost anything to gain the woman he adored.

He was not blind to the fact that the course which the speculators had marked out for him was a most dishonorable one; his better nature revolted against it, and yet the grand passion which had so completely taken possession of him whispered that by following it he might win the peerless beauty after whom his heart hungered.

As he proceeded through the yard to the road, he encountered his cousin, a Cuban, who answered to the name of Pedro Sanches, a man considerably older than Gomes, being over thirty. He was also a practical miner, and had been sent for by Gomes, at the marquis's request, to act as an assistant to the superintendent, and had arrived just in time to see the concern shut up.

Sanches was a dark-browed fellow with a rather sinister look, but he was a very able talker, and had always had great influence with Gomes, although in character he was a decided contrast to the young man, for he was a wild blade, given to dissipation, spending his nights in gaming and drinking, but as he had a head of iron, he always appeared to be all right the next day and never neglected his work.

He had been extremely disgusted upon reaching Slide-Out to find that the mine had shut down, for he had expended all his money during the journey, and was almost penniless when he reached the camp.

Gomes noticed his disappointment and suspected what was the matter, for he knew how reckless Sanches was in regard to money matters and so he questioned him upon the subject.

He found his surmise was correct and then in the most generous manner, volunteered to lend the other all the money he wanted, until the mine opened again.

Sanches swore eternal gratitude, and accepted the offer with alacrity.

"Well, how goes it?" he asked as Gomes came up to him. "Have they come to any determination about the mine?"

Sanches had seen the general call to Gomes and suspected that some arrangement was about to be made.

"Yes, the company will be reorganized and, in all probability, we will be at work in a couple of weeks."

"I shall be deuced glad of it!" Sanches exclaimed. "This idleness plays the mischief with a man. I can usually contrive to spend money enough at night without having all the day to throw it away in. But I say, you seem out of sorts," he observed, abruptly, noticing the cloud upon the brow of the other. "Nothing unpleasant has occurred I hope—no trouble with these lawyers?"

"Oh, no, not in regard to the mine," Gomes replied. "Everything is agreeable—could not be more so. The company is to be reorganized and I am offered the position of manager and requested to name my own terms."

"By Jove! I wish some one would give me such a chance!" Sanches exclaimed.

"You will not have any cause to complain; you will be superintendent, and your salary shall be a liberal one."

"What is the meaning of this troubled look upon your face then?" Sanches asked. "Why, with such a prospect you ought to be all smiles instead of wearing a cloud upon your brow."

Gomes hesitated; the thought came to him that it would be a good idea to ask Sanches's advice; he was a man of the world—had seen a deal of life and would be able to advise him.

He reflected upon the matter for a few moments, and then decided to do so.

Briefly as possible he explained the situation. "Ah, yes, I have heard some gossip in regard to you and the lady down in the camp," Sanches remarked. "I also heard her name coupled with a sport who seems to bear a high reputation in this region; Blake, I think they called him; one of those fresh fellows who are apt to put themselves forward."

Gomes's face grew dark; any allusion to the Fresh annoyed him. He had once endeavored to try conclusions with the Sport and had been easily worsted.

"Oh, no, that is mere idle talk," he answered. "He happened to do the lady a service once by shooting a mountain lion which threatened her, and from that circumstance the talk arose, but there was nothing in it."

"If there was he might take it into his head to interfere in this little game," Sanches suggested.

"Oh, I don't doubt that if he knew the circumstances of the case he would be glad to meddle with it; that is the nature of the man."

"The point then is not to let him know, but I presume the lady will be apt to tell him."

"No, I think not; she has not as good an opinion of him as she once had. This Blake is responsible for the downfall of the Marquis De

Belleville, and although there is little doubt that the Frenchman was a grand rascal yet the girl never really knew what a scoundrel he was, and she feels angry with the Sport for the part he took."

"The game is yours then if you play your cards well!" Sanches declared. "The advice these lawyers gave you was good, in my opinion, and you are not wise if you do not improve the opportunity."

Thus counseled Gomes determined to have an interview with Catalina, and, accompanied by Sanches, proceeded to the hotel.

Gomes went to the parlor, leaving his companion in the saloon, and sent a message to Miss Blanco.

The lady soon came.

Catalina Blanco was a fine type of the dark-eyed, dark-haired Mexican beauty, although she was not as dark-skinned as the average Mexican girl, and her features were radically different; this was owing to the fact that she had an American mother.

The Cuban and the lady were on pretty good terms; since the day when he had declared his passion, and Catalina had refused him, he had not bothered her with his attentions, but had treated her as a brother would have done; so she was always glad to see him.

Her life was lonesome enough, for there were few in the town with whom she could associate, and her only amusement consisted of rides on her spotted mustang.

"I have called to see you in reference to the mine," Gomes remarked, after salutations were exchanged. "The lawyers have come to an understanding about the matter and the company is to be reorganized. They think the mine will pay if it is properly worked; it is their intention to put it in first-class shape, and in order to do this, they are going to levy an assessment of twenty dollars on each share."

Catalina was not much of a business woman, but she knew enough about mining matters to understand the full meaning of this movement.

"Oh, I never shall be able to raise such an amount in the world!" she declared, in alarm. "I own three hundred shares and would have to pay six thousand dollars. It is impossible!"

"Possibly you might sell some of the shares and so raise the money?" Gomes suggested.

"Who in a camp like this possess such a sum or would be willing to invest it?" the girl demanded.

"Oh, no, I know better than that. This assessment means ruin to me!"

"Not at all, for I myself will advance you the money without requiring a single share as security!" exclaimed Gomes, impetuously.

A bright flush swept rapidly over the maiden's cheek. She understood what the declaration meant.

"Oh, no, I cannot accept such a favor at your hands; it would not be right—if you will buy enough of the shares to cover the money—but, no! I cannot accept it even in that shape for I know that you only do it in order to favor me!"

"Catalina, why will you not allow me to aid you in this emergency?" the young man cried. "Why will you not allow me to give you a proof that my love for you is still as intense as ever?"

"Because I feel that I can never return it, and it is not honest to do anything to cause you to hope. I cannot accept your aid even though I am reduced to poverty and want."

The Cuban's face flushed; the determination of the girl aroused his anger and he was on the point of making a bitter remark, but by a great effort checked the words even as they were on his lips.

"And this is your final determination?" he asked, coldly, rising as he spoke.

"It is!" There was no trace of irresolution in Catalina's manner.

"Well, I am sorry that you are so hot-headed and stubborn about the matter, but for all that I shall try to do all that I can for you."

Then, with a low bow, Gomes took his departure.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCLOSURE.

"Oh, this is too dreadful!" Catalina exclaimed, after the Cuban departed. "I cannot accept a service from him; I must not place myself under obligation. He must not hope to win me through gratitude when love is denied him."

Then she sprang to her feet and hurriedly paced up and down the room.

"I was in hopes that I would realize enough money on my shares to enable me to go away from this dreadful place and live in peace somewhere else. Ah, me!" she exclaimed, abruptly. "Will I ever be able to live in peace anywhere now after what has happened? Oh, why did fate ever bring me to this place?"

The speech at this point was interrupted by a slight noise.

Catalina started and looked around to see what had caused it.

A sliding window in the rear wall of the apartment had opened, and the head of the Chinese cook of the hotel, Hop Hi Gee, was framed in the space.

The parlor was used by poker parties very often, who kept up the game to a late hour, and the sliding panel had been arranged so that liquid refreshments could be served to them without the door being opened and the intrusion of unwelcome guests could thus be prevented.

On the face of the Chinaman was the smile, "child-like and bland," which usually appeared there.

"How? no flaid Chinaman—he vely goodee fliend; you cathee touble? 'Melican man, nicee man; why you no cathee money? 'Melican man payee boald, alle same!"

Catalina comprehended the Chinaman's meaning in spite of his peculiar habit of turning all his r's into l's.

"What do you mean by paying board? Are you speaking of that gentleman who has just departed?"

The Chinese nodded and grinned.

"And whose board does he pay?" exclaimed the girl, a sudden suspicion coming into her mind.

For answer the Chinaman extended his skinny finger and pointed to herself.

"Mine!" exclaimed the girl in amazement.

"Do you mean to say that he pays mine?"

"Alle time!"

And then a sudden thought appeared to come to the "John."

He placed his finger upon his lips.

"No give Chinaman away—'Melican man killee Chinaman, maybe."

"Do not be afraid; I shall not betray you, but are you sure about this matter? Have you not made some mistake?"

The Chinaman shook his head.

"'Melican man Blake know—Chinaman know too."

A sudden flush came over the face of the girl as the name of the Sport reached her ears.

Blake! he was the very man who could counsel her how to act in this extremity. She remembered now, too, that he was a partner of the Chinaman in a mining enterprise, and she knew well enough where his mine was situated.

Wildcat, the miners had called the lode in derision when it was announced that the Sport had gone in with Hop Hi Gee, but Blake had declared it was a very good name for a mine and adopted it.

But first she must satisfy herself that it was true that Gomes was paying her board, and a flush of indignation came over her at the idea.

When the landlord had invited her to come to the hotel, he had said that she need not trouble herself about the board—he was in no hurry for his money, and had just as lief wait for a month or two, until the affairs of the mine were straightened out.

She knew that Perkins had been favored both by the marquis and his wife, and she thought his offer was due to his gratitude.

"I will see Mr. Blake about the matter!" she said, abruptly. "Will I find him at the mine?"

The Chinaman nodded, grinned until he showed all the teeth in his head, and then closed the panel.

Rapidly the thoughts flashed through the mind of the girl:

"It is monstrous that I should be under obligations to this man who has been so persistent in his suit, although I have told him frankly that I could never be his wife!" she exclaimed.

The appearance of the landlord at this point gave a new idea to the girl, and she resolved to entrap Perkins into an acknowledgment.

This was not a difficult thing to do, for Catalina proceeded in such a way as to give him an idea that Gomes had spoken to her about the matter, and the landlord had no conception that he was letting the cat out of the bag.

Having satisfied herself on this point, she ordered her horse saddled, and then, when the animal was brought, mounted and rode away.

But she did not proceed straight to the Wildcat Mine, for she did not wish any one to know that she had sought counsel of Blake, but rode off to the southward and then made a detour through the foot-hills, and so was able to reach the trail which led to Blake's property without any one in the town knowing aught of her quest.

The Sport was home, as the girl discovered as soon as she came in sight of the mine, for Blake and his partner, Ringwood, sat outside on an enormous tree stump, engaged in a game of cards. And, by the way, it was the current belief that the two Wildcat pards, as they were usually termed in the town, did more card-playing by far than mining, leaving that work to the patient Hop Hi Gee, but as the Chinaman did not seem to mind it, nobody else complained.

The two had seen the girl coming up through the foot-hills when she was fully an eighth of a mile away, and Blake remarked:

"The heathen was right; he said he would fetch her. That John has got about as many brains as any man in the town, and if he only had the sand to back it up, he would be a hummer, and no mistake! Go on with the game; we will be able to finish it before she arrives."

This was the fact, and they came to the end just as Catalina rode up.

The pards rose and bowed politely to the lady.

"I reckon you will have to excuse me," Ringwood remarked. "I have got a couple of letters to write."

And then, with another elaborate bow to Catalina, he walked to the cabin, which was built over the mouth of the mine, some fifty feet away, and entered it.

"I have come to see you, Mr. Blake, for the purpose of asking your advice," the girl said, swinging herself from the saddle.

The ride had brought the color into her cheeks, and in her neat riding-habit, which being tight-fitting, well displayed the exquisite proportions of her perfect form, she looked more beautiful than ever.

But the Sport did not seem to comprehend what a truly lovely creature she was, for there was no trace of admiration on his impassive face.

He merely bowed—said he would be delighted to oblige her, and begged her to take the seat upon the tree stump which Ringwood had just vacated.

"I am in trouble, Mr. Blake, and so I come to you," she said, as she seated herself upon the stump.

"I shall be very happy indeed to be able to be of service to you," he replied, resuming his seat.

"I don't know as I have treated you very well, lately," she remarked. "But I will admit that the part you took against the Marquis De Belleville made a bad impression upon me. He told me that you were the man who, above all others, brought about his downfall, and now you must remember that both the marquis and his wife were always good to me."

"Oh, I don't blame you for thinking badly of me for the part I took in the affair. It is only natural," the Sport replied. "But you must take into consideration the fact that from the time I made my appearance in the camp the marquis showed himself to be my bitter enemy. He struck at me in every possible way; attempted my life, even, by means of hired ruffians, so that it was a struggle for life or death between us."

"I triumphed in the end, and it was because I had right on my side. De Belleville was no marquis, but an escaped criminal who had fairly been hunted out of Europe by the police; and as for Isabel Escobedo, his wife, if there ever was a fiend in human form it was that woman; a life of crime had been hers, but it was not my hand that struck her down; it was her felon husband, who executed the vengeance of an outraged law. You did not know the true characters of this precious pair, and so it is not strange that you blame me for the part I acted in the affair. They were careful not to allow you to see them as they really were."

"Yes, I know that after Madame De Belleville's death terrible accusations were made against the marquis, and he sought safety in flight," the girl remarked, thoughtfully.

"Was that the act of an innocent man—to take refuge in flight when accused of wrongdoing?" Blake questioned. "It seems to me that if I had been in his position, and knew myself to be innocent, I should have faced my accusers and fought it out."

"Yes, it really seems as if he was afraid to remain and face the charges," Catalina remarked, thoughtfully. "I have never reflected upon the matter before, but I am only a girl, and not used to the ways of the world. All that I thought of was that they were good to me, and that you were their enemy."

"It was your heart that spoke and not your head," the Sport replied. "I don't blame you for inclining to the belief that I persecuted them; but I can assure you that if ever there were two people in this world who deserved to be punished for their crimes, De Belleville and his wife were the ones."

"I see I have acted harshly toward you, and I am sorry for it, for I ought to have remembered that you saved my life once."

"Oh, that is all right; that is in the long ago!" the Sport exclaimed, with a laugh. "You are a lady whom I would be pleased to serve at any time, for you had faith that I was not so bad as the marquis tried to make out. Now then, speak, and tell me what you wish?"

CHAPTER IV.

BLAKE'S ADVICE.

"It is in regard to the Red Dragon Mine that I wish to speak," she explained. "I have all my fortune invested in the property."

"Yes, I understand that you hold a heavy interest."

"The two lawyers who came to settle up matters have decided to reorganize the company, and resume mining operations."

"I expected that they would do so," the Fresh remarked. "There is no doubt that the property is a valuable one, and if the mine is run in the right way, there is a deal of money in it. The trouble with the marquis was that he really had no capital, and when a man does business on borrowed money in a wildcat country, the interest is bound to eat up all the profits, unless a big strike is made, or the man is unusually smart."

"Of course I am not qualified to judge in re—"

gard to that," Catalina observed. "But the marquis bore the reputation of being a talented man."

"He was talented after a fashion," Blake replied. "But he was a novice in mining matters, and there is no business in the world where the knowledge of an expert is more required. I don't believe there is anything that a man can go into where he can sink money any faster than in mining if he does not understand how to run the machine."

"I presume that is true, and the marquis, of course, was not a practical miner. Then, too, I know he was greatly bothered for ready money, for, as he explained to me, when he suggested I should take an interest in the mine, all his funds were locked up in real estate, and he could not procure money without making great sacrifices."

The Fresh laughed.

"Ah, yes, that is the same old story; that is what the wily man of the world always says when he is in difficulties, and is trying to induce somebody to help him out. He has plenty of money, but circumstances render it impossible for him to get at the funds. It will be all right in a week, or a month or so, as the case may be."

"I am only a woman, with no knowledge of business, and, therefore, had no suspicions that the marquis was not telling the truth, so I willingly took an interest in the mine; but now I am threatened with the loss of all I have invested, for these new men intend to levy an assessment of twenty dollars on each share, and as I own thirty thousand shares, I will have to pay six thousand dollars."

"Oh, it is the old game of freeze out!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I anticipated that some such trick would be tried as soon as I took the measure of the two men—the lawyers who came to straighten out matters. They have made the discovery that the property is a valuable one, and so they intend to secure it for themselves. They levy this assessment with the idea that the weak holders of the stock will not be able to pay, and so they can gobble up the property. If a man stops another on a highway, and by means of a pistol forces him to give up his wealth, it is robbery, and they clap the man in a jail as quickly as possible after he is caught, but if by a freeze-out trick a fellow acquires wealth, he is patted on the back, all the world congratulates him on his ability, and the scheme is termed financiering."

"But one is a robbery just as much as the other," Catalina declared. "And if the world does not consider it so, then the world is wrong."

"Undoubtedly; and one of these days, when people get their eyes open, the cunning rascal who robs his neighbor by a trick of this kind will receive the same punishment as the common ruffianly thief."

"It is odd, too, that these lawyers should take it into their heads to try a game of this kind in connection with the Red Dragon Mine," the Fresh continued, after a pause. "For when you get down to the rights of the thing, these two lawyers, to whom the marquis assigned the mine, have no more claim to the property than I have."

Catalina looked amazed at this statement.

"It is the truth!" Blake asserted. "The marquis had no right to the mine, and therefore when he made an assignment of the property to his creditors, he was merely giving away what did not belong him."

"The lode was originally discovered by the Chinaman who is my partner, and he was working it in the primitive fashion common to these almond-eyes sons of the far East, when the marquis happened to run across it; he immediately jumped the claim and fired the Chinaman out of it."

"What an outrage!" the girl exclaimed indignantly.

"That is just the word, but the John had no friends to back his quarrel, and so he was obliged to submit to the robbery."

"If I had known that I would not have been willing to have had a single penny of my money invested in the mine!" Catalina declared.

"Of course you were innocent of any knowledge that the marquis had no more right to the property than the road-agent to the money that he has wrested from his victim."

"But under the circumstances, am I justified then in endeavoring to recover any of the money which I was induced to put into the mine?" Catalina asked, her womanly sense of justice immediately roused.

"Ah, now you are getting in pretty deeply," Blake observed, with a laugh. "If you keep on you will get me over my head and I will have to swim out. I am not much in an argument of this kind when it comes to splitting hairs, but I will do the best I can. To my thinking you are justified in getting back your money if you can. Whether the marquis came in possession of the mine rightly or wrongly has nothing to do with the matter. Your money was not invested in the mine, but in the improvements, and with the machinery Hop Hi Gee has nothing to do, for it was put in after the property was taken

from him. In case of any sudden turn of fortune's wheel—which would give him back the property, by rights he ought to pay for the improvements which have been made, for the mine is now worth many a thousand dollars more than it was when De Belleville jumped the claim."

Catalina pondered over the matter for a moment and then remarked:

"It is indeed an abstruse subject, one which would puzzle far better trained wits than mine, but as far as I can see your statement is correct and any attempt on my part to recover the money which I was induced to put into the concern would not be wronging the Chinaman."

"Certainly not!" Blake exclaimed, decidedly.

"I come to you in this matter for advice because I have confidence that you will do all in your power to aid me."

"You may rely upon that!" the Fresh declared.

"Now what action shall I take? I cannot pay this assessment for I am almost penniless, and have depended upon getting money by selling some of my shares upon which to live."

"Well, let me see," and the Fresh assumed a reflective air. "Six thousand dollars is a pretty good-sized sum and is not to be had for the asking. If I had the money I would gladly lend it to you, or if I could raise the amount in the town I would set about it at once, but I know I cannot do it. I had a few thousand dollars, but when I was over to Tombstone last week I got a chance to invest it in a good speculation there and did so, therefore now I have only a couple of hundred dollars. In regard to money for your personal expenses though, I can help you out all right, and I can fix that matter so that you need not feel under any obligations to me. You can sell me one of your shares in the Red Dragon, I will give you the par value, a hundred for it. That will give me an interest in the mine, and I will be at liberty to look into the matter. If I was an outsider any attempt on my part to ascertain how the concern is going to be worked would be resented by the men in charge."

"I am very much obliged indeed to you for your liberal offer," responded the girl, a grateful blush mantling her cheeks. "But are you not giving me more than the share is worth?"

"Oh, no, a hundred is the value, you know."

"Yes, but it is not worth the full value now—there is the twenty dollar assessment, you know."

"Well, we can arrange that matter after the assessment is paid," the Fresh replied, carelessly.

"You must remember that after the mine is put in good order, and is running at a profit, the shares would be worth more than the par value; you take the hundred now; that will make you independent, and also give me a chance to inquire into the little game that these two lawyers are going to play. When your affairs get straightened out again, if you think I have given too much, it will be easy for you to return the hundred."

"On that condition I will accept the money."

"Here it is," and Blake counted it out. "Now I will write a transfer of the share, and you can sign it."

This was soon done.

"By the way, who told you about this assessment business?"

"Mr. Gomes."

"Ah, the superintendent," and the acute Fresh at once jumped to a conclusion as to why the Cuban had made the disclosure; the expression of annoyance which appeared on Catalina's face as she pronounced the name helped him to a judgment.

"He is posted, of course, being the superintendent."

"He is to be the manager, with full charge."

"Glad to hear it, for he is a good man."

"Whenever you wish to communicate with me, come to the hotel."

The Fresh replied that he would, and then the girl took her departure.

CHAPTER V.

THE FRESH AND THE CUBAN.

As the girl rode down the trail, Dave Ringwood came from the house; the clatter of the mustang's hoofs had warned him that the interview had ended.

Blake related what had occurred.

"Gomes brought the news of the assessment to the girl with the idea that she would be obliged to apply to him for aid," Ringwood observed.

"Oh, yes, that was the game, undoubtedly."

"But she preferred to come to you," the other remarked, with a significant smile.

"Yes; women take queer notions into their heads sometimes," Blake replied, dryly.

"I reckon, old pard, that that dainty creature has fallen over head and ears in love with you."

"Oh, nonsense! She likes me, of course; I know that well enough. I saved her life once, and she is not the kind of girl to forget a favor of that sort, but I don't think she is in love with me. She would rather have me help her than to accept aid from the Cuban, for he has made himself disagreeable to her by his love-making. You see he hasn't sense enough to take no for

an answer, and his attentions annoy the girl; that is all there is to the matter."

"Maybe so; but if I were going to bet about the thing, I would put all my ducats on the chance that you could have the girl if you wanted her."

"Well, I don't," Blake replied, decidedly. "I am not a marrying man. Card-sharps who go into that game seldom succeed in making it pan out well; but I don't intend to stand tamely by and see the lady robbed. I am going to interfere and show these lawyers that they are not the only men in the world who are up to a trick or two."

"You are right in wanting to take a hand in the affair, and then, too, lawyers are fair game—that is, such lawyers as this precious pair. It is a question in my mind which one is the worst; the Tombstone man or the Mexican," Dave Ringwood remarked, musingly.

"Oh, it is a toss up between the two," Blake answered. "The general is like a bulldog, who comes at you with his mouth open, while the Mexican is a snake who tries to strike you in the back. They have evidently won the Cuban over to their side by the offer of the management of the mine and now they are going in to rob the girl to the Queen's taste. She is alone and unprotected, they argue, and I have no doubt they think she will fall an easy prey."

"But after we take a hand in the game they may change their minds," Ringwood observed with a dry chuckle.

"Yes, that is probable, and as I believe in taking the bull by the horns in the promptest manner, I am going to see the lawyers and inquire what they propose to do. I am one of the stockholders in the mine now and I intend to make these speculators understand that they must run things right up to the handle or else there will be trouble," Blake remarked with the air of a man who meant business.

"I reckon these sharps will be astonished when they find out that you intend to have a finger in the pie."

"No doubt, but in a game of this kind there is no telling how the cards will run until after the deal; so long, I'm off!"

Down the trail toward the town went the sport. When he reached the main road he turned and proceeded in the direction of the Red Dragon Mine.

Just before reaching his destination he encountered the Cuban.

Gomes was sauntering along, smoking a cigarette, his face wearing a decidedly gloomy look.

He returned Blake's salutation civilly enough though as the sport came to a halt upon reaching him.

"Anything new about the Red Dragon property?" Blake asked.

"Well, no, nothing in particular," the Cuban answered.

"I heard some talk that the company was going to be reorganized and that you were to be the boss of the concern."

This information did not surprise Gomes, for he immediately came to the conclusion that Catalina had talked of the matter at the hotel, and in a small camp like Slide-Out it did not take long for news to spread.

"Well, there is a prospect that things will be worked that way," he remarked.

"I am glad to hear it!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I don't want to flatter you, but to my notion you ought to make a first-class manager, and that is what the mine needs; the marquis was a smart fellow enough but he knew no more about mining than a hog does of heaven, and it was no wonder that he did not run the mine as it ought to be run. You are a practical miner and know what you are about. But I say, is it decided to go ahead?"

Gomes appeared to be little annoyed by the questioning and he answered, coldly.

"Well, I don't really know as I am at liberty to give any information in regard to the matter."

"Oh you need not be close-mouthed about it!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I am not asking questions out of mere idle curiosity but because I take an interest in the affair. I am one of the stockholders."

The Cuban was surprised by this statement and regarded Blake with an incredulous look.

"That astonishes you, eh?" the Sport exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yes, for I was not aware that you held an interest in the property."

"Well, I do; I think there is money in the concern and so when a chance came along for me to buy an interest I just jumped at it."

Gomes reflected upon the matter for a moment and quickly came to the conclusion that the Sport must have got his interest from Catalina, for he was certain that neither of the lawyers would sell a share, and the thought angered him, for he fancied it showed that a friendly feeling existed between the two.

"Miss Blanco is not wise to sell any of her shares!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"Oh, come now, you are jumping to a conclusion entirely too quick," Blake responded with a laugh. "I didn't say that I got my interest through Miss Blanco."

"Yes, but I know that you did," the Cuban rejoined, "for there are only four parties interested in the mine. I have not sold a share, the lawyers would not, and so you must have bought from Miss Blanco."

"Pard, the way in which you have figured this thing out proves that you have a big head, and goes to show what education will do for a man," the Fresh remarked with a grave face.

But the Cuban was no fool and immediately came to the conclusion that the sport was making fun of him, and his face grew dark with anger.

Involuntarily his hand sought the butt of the revolver belted to his waist, but he did not attempt to draw the weapon for the Sport, warned by the look upon the face of the other that the Cuban meditated hostilities, had also clapped his hand upon his revolver, and in a game of this kind Gomes knew that he could not hope to steal a march upon the Fresh.

For a moment the two looked at each other, the Cuban's eyes glaring in wrath, and upon the face of the Sport a look of cool indifference.

"Are you trying to tempt me to murder you?" Gomes exclaimed in a voice hoarse with anger.

"Oh, no, I am not at all anxious to be planted just at present," Blake responded. "And you can bet your bottom dollar that you will not murder me if I am allowed any say in the matter."

"Why is it that you interfere and cross my path?" Gomes demanded, fiercely.

"Interfere how?" the Fresh asked. "Do you mean to say that I interfered with you because I bought an interest in the Red Dragon Mine from Miss Blanco?"

"Why did she come to you—why did she not allow me to furnish the assistance she needed, which I would have gladly done?"

"Well, I think I can explain the reason which actuated her easily enough. You are a suitor for her love, and if she accepted assistance from you it would put her under obligations which would be unpleasant. Now, I am not in love with the lady, don't want to marry her, and she can transact a little business with me without any fear that in the time to come I shall build any false hopes upon it. Then too assistance is not the right word to use in regard to the transaction. It was a purely business matter. She had something to sell which I wanted to buy. I gave her a fair price, just the same as if she had been a mining broker, and that is all there is to the matter; no sentiment about it, purely business."

This straightforward explanation caused the frown upon the Cuban's brow to lessen. There was good, sound sense in what the Sport said, and even the jealous Gomes was able to see it.

He removed his hand from his revolver.

"I hope it is as you say," he remarked, in a sulky tone, "for I have no wish to quarrel with you, but the man who dares to attempt to win Catalina Blanco will find that I am his foe; this camp will not be big enough to hold both of us!"

And then, after bestowing a ceremonious bow upon the Sport, the Cuban went on his way.

"That fellow and I will lock horns one of these days, as sure as shooting!" Blake remarked, communing with himself, as he walked onward. "And if I do climb him in a way he will despise he will have no one to blame but himself."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPORT AND THE LAWYERS.

UPON reaching the mine, Blake entered the office without standing upon any ceremony.

General Clairborne and the Mexican, Del Santo, were having a cozy chat together, puffing away at their cigars.

The lawyers were in excellent humor, for Gomes had accepted the proposal which had been made to him, and sold ten of his shares to Clairborne so as to give that gentleman and the Mexican control of the stock, and now they could do as they liked with the mine.

The Fresh sauntered into the room in his cool, easy way, nodded in the most friendly manner to the lawyers, just as if they had been old acquaintances, helped himself to a chair, drew a cigar from his pocket, remarking as he did so:

"I reckon I will have to trouble one of you gentlemen for a light."

The pair were a little surprised by the peculiar appearance of the Sport, so different from they average miner, for during their stay in the town he had not encountered Blake before, although he had improved an opportunity to see what the two men were like to whose care the destinies of the Red Dragon Mine had been committed.

The general was the nearest to the sport and he complied with Blake's request by handing him his cigar.

"Think that it is going to rain?" the sport asked as he returned the "weed" and began to "pull" industriously at his own.

"No, I think not," Clairborne replied.

"We need rain a heap, the creeks are low, and a good flood of water would help the boys who are mining up in the gulches."

"Yes, I presume so," the general remarked with a slight yawn, which he intended as a

gentle hint to his visitor that he did not care a continental for the boys in the gulches.

"Of course, high or low water don't make any difference to our mine, for the Red Dragon is not worked by water power."

"Our mine!" exclaimed the general, while the Mexican stared in astonishment at the Sport.

"Yes, our mine!" repeated Blake with a decided emphasis on the "our."

"How might I call your name?" asked Clairborne in the most respectful manner.

"Well, you might call it Jackson Blake, and I reckon you would not be far wrong," responded the Fresh with an elaborate bow.

To these two strangers the name of the Sport conveyed no intelligence; neither one had ever heard of the redoubtable Fresh of Frisco before.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I am really charmed to make your acquaintance, but I must admit that you puzzle me considerably when you use the words *our mine* in speaking of the Red Dragon concern, for I was not aware that you possessed any interest in the property," the general remarked.

"That is not strange, for I only bought my interest about an hour ago."

"And—if you do not mind a little cross-examination—might I ask from whom you purchased your interest, for I was not aware that any of the shares were on the market?" Clairborne questioned in his smoothest tones.

"Oh, go ahead! fire away all you like, I do not mind. I bought an interest from Miss Blanco. You see, I have great faith in this Red Dragon property and believe there is a deal of money in the lode, if it is properly worked, and as I understand that you have put Mr. Gomes in as manager, that insures success, for he is a practical miner and a better man to take hold of a concern of this kind would be hard to find. When I found out how the old thing worked I made haste to get in on the ground floor, for it is my belief that just as soon as the mine gets to running all right the output will be such that the shares will be worth a big premium."

"I certainly hope so," the general remarked.

"Just as soon as I fix the matter all right, and served my interest, I made a bee line for this office so as to find out how things were going. I understand that the company is going to be reorganized and I did not know but what there might be a chance for me to come in for some office. I am not particular what it is so long as the pay is good and the work is light," and then the sport grinned as though he considered that he had said a good thing.

The lawyers looked at each other, the same thought had come to both; despite the striking appearance of the Sport he did not know any more than the law allows, as the saying is, and would be likely to become a bore if he was not promptly "sat upon."

"Well, my friend, I am afraid you are a little late," the general remarked. "There isn't any chance for you to get an office for the places are all filled. I am president of the company, this gentleman the treasurer, and Mr. Gomes, general manager. It is possible that by applying to Mr. Gomes he might be able to do something for you, for he has supreme charge in his department."

"Has there been an election?" cried Blake apparently very much surprised.

"Oh, yes."

"When did it take place?"

"About a half-an-hour ago."

"Why I had my interest in the mine then and I ought to have had a chance to vote."

"We were ignorant of that part, you see," Clairborne remarked rubbing his hands together and smiling benignantly upon the sport, having made up his mind to humor the "softy." "If we had known that you possessed an interest in the property you can rely upon it that we would not have suffered the election to go on in your absence. How many shares, by the way, do you hold?"

"Oh, I am not in deep," the Sport replied with an assumption of great innocence. "I reckon I am playing a kind of a lone hand, as one share is all I can boast."

A quizzical smile appeared upon the faces of the lawyers at this avowal.

"Well, you can rest assured that your interest will be looked after," the general remarked, having hard work to keep from laughing outright in the man's face.

"Oh, that is all right; I am not at all afraid to trust men like you two," Blake replied.

The pair acknowledged the compliment by a bow.

"But I say, I don't exactly understand about this election business," the Sport continued.

"What is it that you do not understand?" the general inquired.

"Why isn't it customary to give notice in regard to such things so that the shareholders will have a chance to vote."

The brows of the Tombstone lawyer contracted and a dark look appeared also on Del Santo's face.

It was plain that they did not relish the inquisitiveness of the Fresh.

"Due notice was given to all the parties inter-

ested!" the general declared with a decided touch of impatience in his manner.

"Well, I didn't get any notice!" Blake exclaimed.

"That is owing to the fact that your name is not on the books of the company; the transfer of your stock has not been recorded," the lawyer explained.

"Yes, but if you had advertised that this election was coming off, I would have taken pains to have had that matter attended to in time so I could vote. I am no lawyer, but it seems to me that this election isn't a legal one."

General Wash Clairborne had never been noted for his patience, and he was not the kind of man to stand any nonsense from a soft-headed miner, so he flared up at once.

"See here, my friend, I think you are showing a disposition to interfere in a matter which does not concern you!" Clairborne exclaimed, angrily.

"Don't concern me?" responded the Sport, apparently profoundly astonished. "How on earth do you make that out? Ain't I one of the shareholders?"

"What does your single share amount to?" the general retorted, in a tone of supreme contempt. "How much did you give for it?"

"Oh, I am not going around giving that away!"

"I'll take it off your hands at fifty dollars, although it isn't worth the half of it!" the lawyer exclaimed, with a lordly air.

"If you will say a thousand, now, we might trade."

This answer made the pair open their eyes wide in astonishment.

"A thousand dollars for one share!" Clairborne cried.

"That is what I said, and you had better jump at the chance, too, for I shall not make the same offer twice. If you don't bite quick, I shall put the price up to two thousand."

"Oh, you must be crazy!" Clairborne exclaimed in disgust. "Do you happen to know that there has been an assessment of twenty dollars levied on each share?"

"Yes, yes, I see, you are trying to work the good old game of freeze out, but there is one man, about my size, who will not be froze out, and you can bet all you are worth on it, too. There has got to be a square deal in the Red Dragon business, and don't you forget it!"

As the Sport spoke, he shook his forefinger at Clairborne.

The action, coupled with the words, acted upon the Tombstone lawyer as a red flag does on an ugly bull.

He sprung to his feet, his face flushing scarlet with rage.

"You miserable bound!" he roared, in the very white-heat of passion, "Do you mean to insult a man of my standing? I have a great mind to kick you through the door!"

"Kick me through the door! There's no man in Slide-Out big enough to do that!" cried the Fresh.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAWYERS CATCH A TARTAR.

BLAKE was on his feet fully as quickly as the lawyer.

"You are an impudent scoundrel and if you don't make yourself scarce I will surely kick you out!" General Clairborne cried.

The Tombstone lawyer was a big man, but not particularly muscular, and rather loosely put together, but being taller and in every way larger appearing than the Sport he was led into the belief that he would not have a difficult job in ejecting the intruder.

If Clairborne had been a sporting man, partial to the pastimes of the prize-ring, the magic circle of the puglists, and so an expert in judging by a man's appearance of his capabilities as a fighter he would never have made the mistake of thinking he could "handle" the Sport without trouble.

"What! kick me out—one of the Red Dragon stockholders?" Blake demanded, assuming to be greatly astonished. "Why that is contrary to all the rules of business! Where were you raised anyway to get the idea that you can run things in this high-handed way? Is this the sort of gait you travel over in Tombstone? If it is, I can tell you that you had better light out for that camp as soon as possible for I reckon you will find this is a durned unhealthy region to try on any such fandango."

"I will give you just three minutes to get outside of that door!" General Clairborne cried, hoarse with anger.

"Oh, bosh!" Blake exclaimed, contemptuously. "I don't want three minutes; if I was going to get outside I could hop out lively in a third of the time. But I am not going, you know; I am one of the shareholders of this concern and as I am not satisfied in regard to this election business I intend to look into the matter, and if there has been any gum-game I reckon you will have to hold another election so as to give me a chance for my white alley!"

The general burst into a loud laugh.

"If you were not such an impudent dog this would be really amusing!" Clairborne declared.

"The idea that a common scoundrel like

yourself, holding one share of stock, should have the audacity to come here with the notion of calling a man like me to an account is perfectly ridiculous, and if you had two grains of sense in your head you would be able to see it. Get out, you idiot! Go and put your head in soak!"

"Oh, you are not half as big a man as you think you are!" the Sport replied. "You may be a great gun in Tombstone, but you don't amount to a row of pins in Slide Out, and you had better haul in your horns or else you stand a chance to have some of the conceit taken out of you in a way that will be apt to make your head swim. I want you to understand that I am going to have a fair shake on this Red Dragon Mine business if I have to thrash every officer of the company from the president downward!"

This bold defiance filled the general's cup of rage to the brim.

"You infernal scoundrel, I will teach you a lesson which will be apt to last you for one while!" Clairborne exclaimed, and he let fly a mighty blow at the Sport which would have materially damaged that gentleman if it had landed as the lawyer intended, but, in some mysterious way—Clairborne was never able to understand just how it was done—the Sport avoided the blow, and before the Tombstone man could withdraw his outstretched arm, the iron-like knuckles of Blake twice visited his face.

Two terrific raps the general got and the blows forced him back fully a yard; then, with a rush, the Sport followed up his advantage and gave the lawyer a fearful right-hander full on "mark," to use the language of the prize-ring, the center of the stomach, which knocked the general into the corner all in a heap.

All this had happened so quickly that Del Santo, who had plucked out an ugly-looking knife, had no opportunity to come to the assistance of his brother lawyer until the general was "knocked out," then, with a blood-curdling Spanish oath, he rushed upon the Fresh.

Blake was not taken by surprise, though; he anticipated just such a movement on the part of the Mexican and was prepared for it.

Del Santo made a desperate and determined stroke at the Fresh with the long-bladed, keen-edged knife, and if the steel had reached the spot at which it was aimed, the career of the Fresh of 'Frisco would have come to a sudden end there and then, and our labors as his historian would have ceased, but the well-aimed stroke did not cut the flesh, for in an extremely dexterous manner Blake grasped the wrist of the Mexican with his left hand, gave it a sharp, sudden twist which wrung a groan of pain from the assailed man and compelled him to drop the knife as though the steel had suddenly become red-hot; at the same time with his right hand the sport gave the Mexican three awful blows in the face which for the moment half-stunned the lawyer.

The moment Del Santo dropped the knife Blake released his hold on his wrist, allowing the dazed Mexican to retreat a pace, and then he dealt the discomfited lawyer another mighty right-hander which sent him to the floor in short order.

By the time that the Mexican was settled, the general had got upon his legs again, plainly showing, however, how roughly he had been handled.

He was no fool, this Tombstone man, and already he had made the discovery that he was no match for the Sport when it came to a boxing bout; there was nothing of the coward about Clairborne though, and despite the fact that he had been so easily whipped, he was not satisfied, but hungered for revenge. Conscious, though, that he stood no chance in a fist fight, he pulled out his revolver, which he carried in the pistol-pocket of his pantaloons.

But the eagle-eyed sport was on the alert, and the moment the general reached for his weapon, Blake drew his handsome, double-acting revolvers.

With one in each hand he covered the pair, and quickly cried in warning:

"Go slow! Don't attempt to raise the hammer of a weapon, or I will drill a hole right through you! I have got the drop on you in the worst kind of way. These tools of mine are self-cockers, and I can riddle you with balls before you can get the hammer of your pistol up!"

The hand of Clairborne had just clutched the handle of his pistol when the warning words of the Sport fell upon his ears.

He was wild with rage, but had sense enough not to attempt to draw his weapon after being thus cautioned, for he understood that the other meant what he said, and would undoubtedly open fire if he attempted to get at his revolver.

He paused, glared with eyes full of rage at his antagonist, and in a voice hoarse with passion, cried:

"You miserable scoundrel! You don't dare to give me a fair chance at you!"

"Wash, old pard, you are about the most unreasonable man that I have met in a dog's age!" the Fresh declared. "You brought on this fight of your own accord—went into it with your eyes open, and now, after having been thrashed in a gentlemanly and scientific manner, you are

complaining that you are not getting a fair show. What do you want—the earth?"

By this time the Mexican had recovered from the effects of the fearful blows he had received, and was on his feet again; thinking the attention of the Sport was taken up by Clairborne, he let his hand steal cautiously behind him in the direction of his revolver.

But the Fresh was too old a hand at this sort of thing, lot to anticipate what the Mexican's action would be the moment he found himself in a condition to renew the fight, and so he was quick to detect the movement of the Del Santo's hand.

"None of that, you man from Durango!" Blake exclaimed. "I have got my eyes on you, and you can bet all you are worth that I am not the kind of bird to be caught napping! I give you fair notice, too, that I can shoot just as well with my left hand as with my right, and if you are not anxious to take a free ride in the first carriage of a procession, you will not try to get your weapon out!"

The alacrity with which the Mexican withdrew his hand was wonderful.

"That is sensible!" the Sport commented. "I see you are not troubled with the big head; you are wise enough to know when you have got enough. I always like to do business with men of that kind."

"The advantage at present is on your side, but it will not always be thus!" the general declared. "My turn will come, and I warn you that I will make you pay dearly for this day's work."

"That is a foolish speech to make," the Fresh rejoined. "I have got the best of this fight and hold the lives of both of you at my mercy; if I choose I could settle the matter now for good and all, and many men upon being threatened with vengeance in the time to come would be apt to take action now so as to beat that little game. But I am not that kind of a hair-pin; I am not at all afraid of your getting the best of me, and if you are not satisfied with this little trial of strength and skill, and think that under other conditions you might be able to do better, I am just the sport to give you the chance. You can have satisfaction in any reasonable way that you may desire, a street fight, regular duel, or anything you please; you never struck an easier man to get along with than yours truly to command."

CHAPTER VIII.

BLAKE DEFINES HIS POSITION.

THE lawyers looked at each other, as much as to ask what kind of a man was this cool and daring sport.

That they had made a fearful mistake in their estimate, and woefully underrated him was evident.

He was no shallow-headed fool, but a keen, hardy "rustler," fit to cope with any man whom he would be likely to encounter along the whole line of the frontier.

"You make a mistake," the Mexican remarked, quick to resort to deception after the fashion of his race. "I had no intention of drawing a weapon."

"Well, I am glad to hear that!" the Fresh exclaimed, in the heartiest manner possible and he spoke just as if he believed the statement.

"You must excuse my jumping to the conclusion that you were going to pull a gun upon me. I am an awful suspicious fellow, and in a picnic of this kind whenever I see a man's hand sneaking to where his weapons are kept I always take it for granted that he is going to pull on me, if he can get the chance."

By this time the general's rage had in a measure subsided and reason resumed its sway. He was helpless in the power of the man whom he had so wantonly assailed and any attempt to continue the struggle would be almost certain to cost him his life. Besides the sport had declared that he was willing to give him satisfaction, and as Clairborne was an expert pistol-shot this seemed to indicate a way in which vengeance could be had.

"As far as I am concerned I am going to let this thing stop right here!" the general exclaimed. "That is, I mean that I will not pursue the quarrel further at present, but I shall hold you to your promise to give me satisfaction at some future time."

"Yes, and I shall also require satisfaction!" Del Santo cried. "I am a gentleman of as good blood as can be found in all Mexico and it is monstrous that a man like myself should be knocked about as though I were a common cowboy."

"You ought to have kept out of the fight if you did not want to be handled without gloves," the Sport answered. "I reckon that when a man draws a knife on me I am not going to allow myself to be carved if I can prevent it. But to return to our mutton. This little scrap is ended?"

"Yes, sir; for the present you can consider it so, but I expect that you will give me satisfaction hereafter."

"All right! That suits me; you will always find me on deck to meet any demands of that sort," Blake remarked. "When you come to the conclusion that you are hungry for blood

and slaughter, send your man to the Wildcat Mine, and I will be found there, ready to accommodate you upon the shortest notice."

"You will not have long to wait, sir, I can assure you!" the general declared. "You have managed to get the best of the fight this time, but that is because I am not a boxer, and have had little experience in fist-fights, but when it comes to revolvers it is quite a different matter."

"In that line I suppose you are a whole team, and a dog under the wagon, eh," the Sport observed, banteringly. "And after I get your challenge and arrange to meet you, the next thing for me to do will be to pick out my burial-place and make preparations for the funeral."

"If you summon up courage enough to meet me, and I do not put you in condition for planting, then I am not the man I think I am," the lawyer declared, boastfully.

"Maybe you have made some mistake about the matter," the Fresh rejoined. "I have met men on several occasions who felt quite certain that they could wipe me out, and who were extremely astonished at the way in which they slipped up when they came to try the riddle. But we are only wasting words in speculating in regard to the matter, and we had better come down to solid business. As this unpleasantness is over for the present, I will put my barkers away," and, suiting the action to the word, Blake replaced his revolvers in their holsters.

"Now then, I tell you frankly that I am not satisfied in regard to this election business."

"That is ridiculous," the general exclaimed. "What possible difference can it make to you whether you were present at the election or not?"

"If I was present I would have a chance to vote," Blake replied in an innocent way, but there was a shrewd twinkle in his eyes which belied the words.

"Now, see here, stranger, talk sense!" the Tombstone man exclaimed, impatiently. "What would your one vote amount to, anyway? This gentleman, Mr. Del Santo, of Durango, and myself, own shares enough to enable us to control the election, and thus we are enabled to arrange matters to suit ourselves, without being obliged to pay any attention to what any of the rest of the stockholders may want. We are going to run the machine in our own way, and there isn't anybody able to stop us."

"Is it true about the twenty dollars assessment?" the Sport inquired.

"Yes, we have got to have money to run the thing with, and that is the only way to raise it," the lawyer replied.

"But it is a freeze-out game all the same, for you reckon that some of the shareholders will not be able to raise the money."

"Oh, I never troubled my mind about the matter," Clairborne replied, with an air of indifference. "I suppose there are some weak-kneed stockholders who will not be able to raise the money, and so will be obliged to lose their interest; it is usually the case in all affairs of this kind, but it cannot be helped; it is the fortune of war."

"But to come back to this election," Blake remarked. "I reckon it wouldn't stand in law, for certain notice ought to be given, and certain forms observed, which has not been done, and if the election is not legal you have no right to levy an assessment."

"Oh, don't you worry your head about that!" the Tombstone man exclaimed. "Both Mr. Del Santo and myself are lawyers, we know what the law is, and we are not fools enough to make any blunder. If you come to look into the matter, you will find we have complied with all the forms required by the law in a case of this kind; and even if we had been so careless as to have neglected to cover a point or two, as we are in possession of the property, and control a majority of the shares, it would be a hard matter for anybody to make much trouble for us in a law court."

"Well, I must admit that it really looks as if you had things fixed so you can have everything your own way."

"Oh, yes," and Clairborne rubbed his hands together in a way that indicated complete satisfaction. "When men like Del Santo and myself go into a thing, we go in to win, and you are safe in betting all the money you can raise on that, every time!"

"Kinder got a sure thing, eh?" the sport queried, in a reflective way.

"Yes, we think so," and again the lawyer rubbed the palms of his hands together, while Del Santo grinned.

"Just about as sure as four aces and a king at poker—you handle the pasteboards once in a while, I suppose?" the Fresh observed.

"Oh, yes, both Del Santo and myself are fond of a quiet little game of 'draw' now and then. But you are right in your simile. We have got a sure thing in this Red Dragon Mine business. As sure as four aces and a king is to sweep the pot at a game of draw-poker."

"Yes, but even a sure thing of that kind slips up once in a while. I have seen four aces and a king beat," the Sport observed.

"How's that?" the lawyer inquired in astonishment.

"Four jacks and a bowie-knife, and it rakes the pile!"

"Oh! you mean that as a threat?" Clairborne cried, quick to comprehend what the other was driving at.

"Yes, I do," Blake replied, frankly. "You think you have got this thing all nicely arranged—all cut and dried, so that no one can interfere at all with you, but in a region of this kind many a time the law has been beaten by a man who had nothing to back him but a pair of good revolvers or a ten-inch bowie-knife."

"And is that the game you think of trying?" Clairborne asked, angrily.

"If you try to beat any of us stockholders out of our rights in this Red Dragon business, you can bet it is!" the Sport replied.

"Well, sir, we will try to give you as good as you send," the lawyer replied, defiantly. "But as far as you are concerned personally, I reckon that neither the Red Dragon Mine business, or any other, will have much interest for you five minutes after the time when the word is given and we are facing each other with pistol in hand."

"That is another sure thing, to your notion, on which you may slip up," the Fresh rejoined, and then, backing toward the door, he continued:

"I am to be found at the Wildcat Mine—almost anybody will tell you where that is, and I will stay at home until your messenger calls; don't keep me waiting; so long!" and Blake departed.

The lawyers watched him through the window, by means of which they could command a view of him as he strode away.

"That fellow threatens to be dangerous," the Mexican remarked.

"Don't fear! I will put a bullet through him without fail if he dares to face me!" Clairborne declared.

CHAPTER IX.

GOMES IS ASTONISHED.

"CURSE the scoundrel!" the general exclaimed, as he walked to the looking-glass and surveyed his bruised features. "He has made a show out of me. It will be a week or two before I will look like myself again."

Then he proceeded to where the washing arrangements were in the corner, and began to bathe his bruises.

The Mexican followed the general's example, and a fearful oath came from his lips as he saw himself in the mirror.

The iron-like fists of the Sport had "adorned" him with as fine a pair of black eyes as mortal ever possessed.

"The miserable ladron!" Del Santo cried, in a towering rage. "Never before in my life have I been so shamefully outraged!"

"Oh, he put it up fearfully hot for us! There is no mistake about that!" Clairborne remarked. "My face really feels raw where the fellow struck me, and when I got that awful lick in the bread-basket I actually felt as if a mule had kicked me. I never realized before how hard it was possible for a man to hit. Upon my word, for a minute or two I thought I was done for. I never was so sick in all my life."

"The scoundrel!" the Mexican hissed between his clinched teeth. "If you do not kill him, I certainly will, but I shall not give him any chance for his life, though; I will strike him down as I would a dog, without mercy."

"The devil will be in it if I do not make an end of the rascal!" the Tombstone man declared. "I never was more deceived in a man in all my life. I took him to be a thick-headed booby, and did not anticipate that there would be any trouble in handling him. Of course, I make no pretension to being much of a boxer, but I have been mixed up in a few skirmishes, and always managed to more than hold my own without any trouble, but when I stacked up against this Sport, as a gambling sharp would say, I made the biggest kind of a mistake; in fact, bit off a good deal more than I could chew."

"I wish the scoundrel had been in the infernal regions before I encountered him!" the Mexican declared, woefully, contemplating his disfigured face in the glass. "I shall be ashamed to go in the street. Never have I been so abused since I was born. Just look at my face! Do I not appear as if I had been beaten within an inch of my life?"

The general suspended the application of the cold water to his bruises for a moment to contemplate the features of his companion, and, despite the soreness of his own hurts, and the mortification he felt over the defeat he had experienced, he could not help smiling at the aspect that the Mexican presented.

"You must really excuse my grinning, old fellow," he said. "But you do look extremely comical with that ferocious pair of black eyes. I don't think I ever saw a man more thoroughly disfigured."

"The wretched ladron!" cried Del Santo in a fearful rage. "I will have his heart's best blood in reparation for this outrage!"

"There is no use of our attempting to disguise the fact that you and I in this affair have acted like a pair of donkeys, and, undoubtedly,

we will be the laughing stock of the town as soon as the story of the fight becomes known."

"I did not think of that!" exclaimed the Mexican, his dark face growing darker than ever with anger. "No doubt this wretch will boast in every saloon in the camp of how he punished us. Maledictions on him!" and, utterly losing his temper, Del Santo swore at a fearful rate.

The general resumed his cold water treatment until the Mexican stopped his torrent of oaths, and then he remarked, quietly.

"It isn't of any use to waste your breath in swearing, Del Santo; if you swear, you will not catch any fish."

"Caramba! if the scoundrel had disfigured you as he has me, you would be sure to swear, too!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Oh, as far as that goes, I think I got the pepper hotter than you did, only I don't show the marks quite so badly," Clairborne replied. "And although it is not in my nature to kick up much of a row about a thing of this kind, yet you would be safe in betting all you are worth that I feel it all the same. I am just as desirous of securing vengeance as you are, and you can rest assured that I will not be satisfied until I have shed the heart's blood of this Sport."

The entrance of the Cuban, Francisco Gomes, at this moment, interrupted the conversation.

Vast was the look of astonishment which appeared on his face as he surveyed the bruised features of the pair.

He understood that Blake's interview with the lawyers had been a stormy one, for he had encountered the Sport on the road, and in answer to his inquiry as to how he had got on, the answer had been that he, Blake, hadn't got on at all, and that he "reckoned" there would be "music in the air before long!" but he had no idea that anything more than words had passed.

There was an awkward pause for a moment as the three gazed upon each other.

The general was the first to break the silence. "We are repairing damages," he remarked.

By this time Del Santo had got at the water and was applying a wet towel to his eyes.

"So I see, and from your looks I should imagine that you and your visitor must have had a pretty lively time," Gomes replied.

"You are safe in betting high on that," Clairborne declared. "I say, what kind of a blamed man is this fellow, Blake, anyway? Del Santo and myself came to the conclusion that he was a thick-headed booby, after talking to him awhile, and when he got ugly we went in to put him into the street, but the thing didn't work just as we had anticipated, for the galoot knocked us out in short order, and I will do him the justice to say that I don't believe he more than half-ried, either."

"I could have told you that you stood no chance with that man in a personal encounter!" Gomes exclaimed. "He is what you Americans call a terror. Since coming to this camp he has whipped some of the best men in it, and his reputation as a fist-fighter is so well established that the greatest desperado in the town would hesitate to cross his path."

"Oh! if that is the case it is no wonder then that he cleaned us out so easily," Clairborne remarked. "We walked into the thing as innocently as a couple of doves, not having the slightest suspicion that we were tackling the champion fighter of the town."

"That is what he is," Gomes replied.

"How is he on the shoot? for I am going to try his skill in that line. No man pounds me, you know, with impunity!" the general declared.

"He bears the reputation of being a good shot, I believe, but I do not know much about it. His name rests chiefly on his fist-fights, in which he is a very demon."

"You are right, he is a devil!" Del Santo exclaimed. "But if I live, and Clairborne here does not make an end of him, I will some day put a knife into the scoundrel!"

The general then related the particulars of the conversation which he had had with the sport.

Gomes listened attentively and a dark frown gathered on his face at the end of the recital.

"I see what the fellow is after!" he announced. "It is not his paltry one share. He doesn't care for that, but it is Miss Blanco's interest that he has at heart!"

"Ah, that is the lady you are sweet on; is this fellow your rival then?" Clairborne asked.

"I don't know what to think about it," the Cuban replied, sullenly. "Both deny that there is any love affair existing between them, and as far as I can ascertain he does not pay her any attention, but in this case when the girl found that she was threatened with the loss of her shares and needed funds it was this Sport she sought for advice and money. I know she got money from him, for that is how he got his share. I have been paying her board at the hotel, without her knowledge, but she discovered the truth in some way, sent for the landlord and settled her bill to date, and, with all a woman's shrewdness, she managed the thing so well that the landlord had no suspicion that I was totally ignorant of the whole affair."

"I gather from what you say that you did not succeed in coming to any arrangement with the lady," the general remarked.

"No, she rejected my suit, and I made up my mind to try the scheme you suggested and see if I couldn't force her to accept me to save herself from ruin."

"Yes, yes, I see, and, as I said before, the plan ought to work."

"But this Blake's interference may upset our calculations," the Cuban observed.

"You think that there is no doubt that it is solely on behalf of the girl that he has taken an interest in the matter?" Clairborne asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, it is absurd to think that he would trouble himself to make a fight for a single share."

"Well, the only thing to do then is to settle Mr. Blake as soon as possible, and I will undertake the job. I will challenge him to a duel with revolvers. Will you act as my second and bear the hostile message?" the general asked.

"With pleasure," Gomes answered. "But I ought to challenge him myself, although he denies that he is in love with Miss Blanco."

"If I don't settle him, then you can try your luck; but if he escapes he will be the first man that ever did so when I got him under the muzzle of my revolver."

Ten minutes later the Cuban was on his way to the Wildcat Mine.

CHAPTER X.

A SLIGHT MISTAKE.

AND now for a brief time we must allow the Fresh and his affairs to rest while we introduce some new characters to our reader's notice.

First of them is a fellow who was one of the noted men of the camp; Kid Mitchel he was called; a muscular, thick-set fellow with a bull neck, a bullet-like head and a coarse, evil-looking face.

He had drifted into the town on foot, and as he honestly confessed, was pretty nearly broke.

When questioned regarding his business he professed to be a miner, said he was also a teacher of sparring, being a professional pugilist.

As if by instinct the fellow had found his way to the Mule Pass Saloon, kept by a brawny Dutchman named Hans, the worst dive in the town.

There were always a lot of worthless hummers hanging around the place, and among them were a couple who prided themselves upon being fighting men, and so the new-comer's abilities in the fighting line were soon tested.

Kid Mitchel proved himself to be a good man by disposing of these worthies in short order, and then, for a while, he was quite a lion among the worst class of the miners, and, probably, would have made a good living mining, giving boxing lessons, and getting up sparring exhibitions, if he had not been such a slave to liquor, but as the fellow couldn't keep sober, none of the miners would give him work, and at last; even Dutch Hans, of the Mule Pass Saloon, began to think his room was better than his company, and when he intimated as much to the redoubtable Kid that worthy became indignant and went in to clean out the saloon.

The dive-keeper, though no boxer, yet was a mighty man of war when his goods and chattels were threatened; he was a big, powerful fellow, and, with the aid of a large club, he succeeded in ejecting the warlike Kid.

The vanquished bruiser, who was not materially injured in the fight, made his way to the small horse corral in the rear of the saloon and there went to sleep.

It was late in the afternoon when he awoke; he was now sober, and fell to meditating in regard to what he should do. All his money was gone; everything of any value too, excepting his clothes, which were very much the worse for wear, and an old six-shooter, upon which no pawnbroker would have thought of advancing more than a dollar.

"I am reg'larly cleaned out," he muttered. "I reckon I have played this hyar camp for all it is worth, and the quicker I git out of it the better. I must make a raise somehow, though, to help me along on the road."

Under these depressing circumstances there was only one thing to be done, and that was to turn road-agent and collect "toll" on the trail until he secured enough cash to enable him to go on to pastures new.

As soon as he came to this determination the Kid proceeded to put the scheme into execution.

He had a small supply of cartridges in his pocket and carefully recharged his weapon.

"It won't do to have the thing out of order," he muttered. "I would be in a bad box if a galoot on the road cut up rusty, showed fight, and my gun was no good. This hyer thing ain't worth much, anyway, but it is jest as good as the best gun in the world to skeer a man with, but I wouldn't like to trust it if I was going into a reg'lar fight."

After satisfying himself that his weapon was in good order the Kid left the corral.

It was his intention to lie in ambush on the lower road, which led down into the valley of the Rio San Pedro, the main trail into the camp, and the one by which nearly all travelers came.

But the fellow was too cunning to proceed

through the camp and leave it by the lower road.

The Mule Pass Saloon was at the upper end of the town and after leaving the corral the Kid struck off into the foothills intending to make a half mile around the camp so as to get into the road without any one knowing about it.

On his way out of the corral he picked up an old grain-sack which he intended to use to disguise his person.

The fellow reached the road without encountering anybody and walked along for a good two miles before he came to a spot which he thought would be suitable for his purpose.

Then he tore the bag so as to make peep-holes through which he might see, drew it over his head and, with a pleased chuckle, announced that he was ready for business.

There was a large boulder by the left hand side of the road, and at its back was a cluster of juniper bushes which afforded an excellent hiding place.

Within the bushes the Kid concealed himself and waited patiently for his game.

As he lay in ambush the ruffian meditated in regard to his future movements.

"If I kin only strike a man who will pan out well I will give this country the go-by for good and all," he soliloquized. "I will git fer the Pacific Slope, whar thar is some show fer a man to git along; thar's no money for a man of my inches in this blasted country."

His reflections were interrupted at this point by the approach of a traveler up the trail.

As soon as the sound of the footsteps fell upon his ears, he grasped his weapon and peered eagerly through the bushes of the juniper.

The ruffian was somewhat disappointed, for the fact that the new comer was on foot did not argue favorably in regard to his wealth.

"If it was a horseman now he would be apt to be better heeled with money, but I reckon I will go for him, anyway! All is fish that comes to my net!" he muttered.

The traveler came in sight; he was a tall, disreputable-looking man, badly dressed, and he came slouching along with the air of one who had been making a forced march for some time.

The Kid thought the game to be a most unpromising one, but determined to "go through" the stranger, nevertheless; so, when the man got within thirty feet he sprung out from his hiding-place in the bushes and, covering the new-comer with his revolver, uttered the "slogan," so common to the wilds of the West:

"Hands up!"

"Oh, you bet!" cried the stranger, coming to a halt immediately, and holding up his hands. "I am a gen'leman, I am; you don't have to tell me twice to do a thing of this hyer kind! I am used to perlitte society, and you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I know how to behave when I strike it. Oh, it does me proud to hear that good, old-time yell, for it is so long since I have been held up that I had almost forgotten how the trick was worked, but you do it well, stranger, you do; there is no discount in the way you work it. I reckon you must be a high-flyer at this hyer sort of thing."

The Kid was considerably astonished by this flow of eloquence, as well as by the easy manner in which the stranger took in the situation, and the impression immediately came to him that he would get "mighty poor pickings," as he would have said, out of this "cove."

"Clap a hush on yer jawing tackle!" the ruffian growled. "Durn me, if you ain't got more gab than any man that I have struck in a year."

"That is me—now you are talking!" the other exclaimed, with a prodigious grin. "Oh, you kin bet high that I war around when tongues were given out. No man ever knew me yet who wasn't willing to allow that I had the gift of the gab."

"Will you shet up?" the Kid growled. "What in thunder do you s'pose I keer? I am hyer on business, I am; I am the toll-gatherer on this hyer road and—"

"You don't mean to say that this measly old trail is a toll-road, do ye?" interrupted the stranger, in accents of surprise.

"Will you hush yer durned talk, or do you want me to shoot a part of yer jaw off?" the Kid cried.

"Oh, no, you needn't go to any sich trouble!" the new-comer declared. "I ain't got a bit more jaw than I want—hain't got a mite to spare!"

"Shet up!" and the ruffian menaced the stranger with the revolver.

"You bet! you don't have to tell me more'n twice fer to keep still. I will be as dumb as an oyster."

"As I was a-saying, I am the toll-gatherer on this road, and I will have to trouble you to fork over yer wealth."

"Whar's yer mule-team?" demanded the other, abruptly.

"Eh, whar's that?" exclaimed the Kid, not knowing what to make of the question.

"I axed you whar yer mule team was?"

"I hain't got no mule team—whar are yer driving at?"

"Why for to carry off my wealth, you know,"

the stranger explained, and then he "haw, haw-ed" in great glee at the joke.

"None of yer durned foolishness! Spill out yer wealth. You must have some money, I reckon!" the Kid growled, not enjoying the joke.

"Stranger, I ain't got two coins for to rub ag'in' each other. I am clean bu'sted. All I have got is a pop-gun, which ain't worth four bits of any man's money, but you're welcome to that, if you want it. No man shall say that Slippery Abe Smith wasn't willing to do the best he could when axed to do it in a gen'lemanly manner."

A look of intense disgust appeared on the face of the ruffian. Here was a disappointment indeed.

CHAPTER XI.

BLACK JOHN.

THE Kid meditated over the situation for a moment.

Most certainly the appearance of the man indicated that he spoke the truth; but then appearances are sometimes deceptive.

"Hain't got no money?" he queried.

"Nary a piece."

"What do you mean by traveling around dead broke?" the Kid demanded. "Nice kind of a galoot you ar' to put a cuss to the trouble of holding you up when you ain't worth it?"

"I didn't ax you to go to no trouble on my account," the other responded. "And I reckon the game must be mighty good when you kin keno every time."

"Mebbe you are lying, and you have gotsome ducats!" the Kid exclaimed, suspiciously.

"You kin s'arch me if you want to, and I stand ready to eat all the money you kin find on me," and, to give force to his assertion, the other turned his pockets inside out to show that they were empty.

"Got yer money hid away in yer clothes, I reckon," the Kid remarked.

"Waal, I reckon I hain't!" the stranger responded, stoutly. "Why, old man, I am so completely down to the bed-rock that I have been thinking of starting in on the toll road biz myself. I reckon I would make a first-class collector. Say, I will go in with you; we ought to make a fine team."

"I reckon I don't want no partners!" the Kid replied. "And—"

"Hush!" cried the other, holding up his hand in warning; "thar's a boss coming; I kin hear the sounds of the hoofs. Now, stranger, now's yer chance! Take me in for a pard, and we will climb this hyer galoot together and mebbe make a big raise."

The Kid hesitated for a moment, then, as the sound of the horse's hoofs came distinctly to his ears, he realized that there was no time to be lost. He did not care to take the other in with him, but, under the circumstances, he did not see how he could avoid doing so, therefore, reluctantly he said:

"All right! you kin hop in, but you want to put a kiver over yer face so the galoot won't be able to spot you arterwards."

"Oh, teach your grandmother to suck eggs!" Slippery Smith exclaimed. "Do you s'pose I ain't up to snuff? You kin jest bet high that I have worked the road-agent trick many a time since I was hatched, and I reckon I kin do it too as well as any man that ever took a hack at the business."

"Enter the bushes with you, quick then!" Kil commanded.

The two sought concealment behind the junipers, and there Slippery Smith produced a ragged handkerchief and, fastening one end of it under his hat, arranged it so that it formed a sort of a mask.

"How's this, pard?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I reckon that will do," the other responded.

The appearance of the horseman put an end to the conversation.

The new-comer was a man about the medium size, mounted on a small "claybank" Mexican horse, an animal of the singed cat order, which was a good deal better than he looked; the rider was as dark in the face as an Indian, all the lower part of his features were covered by a heavy black beard, and his hair, black as jet, like the beard, was worn long, coming well-down over his neck in the cowboy style.

He was dressed roughly, after the fashion of the frontier, and was evidently a Mexican, although he did not wear the national garb.

The horseman had been riding on at a gallop, but just after coming in sight of the concealed pair—he was some few hundred yards away—he allowed his steed, evidently fatigued by the pace at which he had come, to slacken into a walk.

"This hyer galoot don't look as if he would pan out well!" Slippery Smith observed in a discontented tone as he took note of the stranger's appearance.

"I hate these Greasers," the Kid replied in the same cautious tone. "But all the money that they ever have is on their clothes, gold buttons, and all sich jim-cracks."

"This hyer galoot ain't rigged out that way

though, so, mebbe, he will have some wealth in his pockets," Slippery Smith remarked.

"We will sample him mighty durned soon!" the Kid declared.

The stranger came on, evidently totally unsuspecting of danger, and when he was within some twenty paces of the rock, behind which the ruffians were concealed, they rose and, with leveled revolvers, commanded the horseman to halt and put up his hands.

The new-comer immediately complied with the command, but did so in such a careless manner—with such an absence of all signs of apprehension, that the pair at once got the impression that he had very little to lose.

"Gentlemen, my horse is halted, my hands are up, and I am yours to command," the rider said, in a deep, sonorous voice.

"We are toll-gatherers on this road, and we want yer wealth, so shell out as soon as you kin!" the Kid exclaimed.

"The explanation was not really necessary," the horseman remarked. "I understood what your little game was the moment you made your appearance in the road. I am too old a man not to be up to a move of this kind, and in truth, gentlemen, I have taken a trick or two in this line myself. Possibly if either of you two have ever heard of the Gray Cats of San Pedro, and know something of the members of that once famous band, my name may not be unfamiliar to you. I am called John Black—more commonly Black John."

The story of the robber band, who had their headquarters in the wilderness of the Sierra de San Pedro, and from the odd gray skin head disguises which they wore, termed themselves the Gray Cats of San Pedro, was a well-known one, for they had extended their ravages in past years even to the immediate neighborhood of Slide-Out, but for quite a long time nothing had been heard of the Gray Cats, and it was surmised that the band had dispersed.

"Oh, yes, we have hern tell of the Gray Cats," the Kid responded. "That is, I have; I can't answer for my pard hyer."

"You kin bet I have hern of the Gray Cats!" Slippery Sam exclaimed. "But I thought the gang had bu'sted all to thunder, for I hain't heered a word 'bout them for a long time."

"Your supposition is correct; the band is dispersed, and I reckon I am the only man left in the neighborhood."

"Stranger, I hate to put it to you too strongly, and if I wasn't broke clear 'way-down to bed-rock, I would be apt to let you off, on the principle, you know, that dog ought not to eat dog," the Kid remarked. "But both me and my pard hyer are flat broke, and we have got to have some ducats out of somebody, and as you are the first man that we have struck to-day we will have to call upon you to pony up."

"Boys, a five-dollar gold-piece is all the wealth I have and you are welcome to that to help you on your way, but if you are willing to go in with me I can put you on a track where a deal of money can be made."

"How is that?" the Kid inquired.

"Spit it out, stranger!" Slippery Smith cried. "We are with you if thar's a chance to make a stake!"

"Although I am not well-beeled, financially speaking, at present, yet I can command plenty of money in a short time," the horseman explained. "As soon as I arrive in Slide-Out I will be all right. I have a friend there who is well-fixed, and when I explain to him that I have a scheme on hand in which there are many ducats he will be glad to put up the rocks to enable me to go ahead."

"You are all right then," the Kid remarked.

"You kin jest bet that I wish I was fixed in that way!" Slippery Smith declared.

"The little game that I propose to work is to revive the Gray Cats. I think there is a fine opening for such a band in the neighborhood of this camp; the town is on a boom just now, and if the throng is handled rightly there is a heap of money in it, according to my thinking."

The words of the stranger made a deep impression upon the two men, for they believed that he had struck a big idea.

"Wal, stranger, I reckon you are on the right track," the Kid remarked.

"You kin bet high that he is!" Slippery Smith declared.

Both of the fellows were well-aware that they were not fit to form and direct such a band, but from the manner and words of Black John they got the idea that he was able to perform just such a task.

"What do you say then—will you two go in with me?" the horseman asked. "I know that we can make a big stake if we manage the affair in the proper manner."

"I am with you, pard!" Kid Mitchel exclaimed.

"Me too!" Slippery Smith assented. "I reckon I kin smell out a good thing as far as the next man, and you may kick me for a sucker if this ain't the best deal I have heerd ov for a big while."

So the agreement was made.

Black John was to ride on to Slide-Out and the other fellow slowly behind. They were to enter the town one by one so as not to excite

suspicion, and after he saw his friend and arranged matters with him Black John would give further orders.

On went the horseman.

"Two good men secured!" he exclaimed. "The first move in the game which will end with the death of this accursed Fresh of 'Frisco."

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHALLENGE.

AFTER his interview with the lawyers the Fresh went directly to the hotel and asked to see Miss Blanco.

The landlord conducted him into the parlor and soon the girl made her appearance.

She greeted the sport cordially and he explained that he had come to see her on a little matter of business.

"This isn't exactly the sort of place in which to discuss an important business matter," Blake remarked with a glance around. "But if you will sit close to me, and we talk in a low tone, we may be able to speak without any one being the wiser for it. Of course, I don't know as anybody would take the trouble to play the spy upon us, but in an important matter of this kind, it is always best to be on the safe side."

"Yes, that is very true," Catalina observed, and then she seated herself by Blake's side, and from this time on the conversation was carried on in such low, cautious tones that it would not have been possible for any spy, listening without the room, to hear what they were saying.

"I have just come from an interview with these lawyers," Blake began. "They have held an election, put the Tombstone man in as president and the Mexican as treasurer."

"Have they held an election already?" the girl asked, in surprise. "I received a notification that there was to be an election, but I understood it was to be this day, week."

"Have you the paper with you?"

"Yes," and producing it, she handed the notice to the sport.

It was such a miserable scrawl—so badly written—that it was as much as the Fresh could do to read it. It was drawn out in such a roundabout way that it seemed as if the election was to be held on that day, and the week later referred to a date when an assessment on the stock might be expected.

Blake read the letter over carefully, and explained to Catalina how she came to make the mistake.

"Yes, yes, I see."

"It is a trick, of course; the notice was written in that way so as to deceive you. They did not wish you to be present, nor your shares represented by a proxy, although from the way they had arranged matters, neither you, nor any one else, could have prevented them from running things just as they had planned. They had to give you notice of the election, and were careful not to miss the point."

At this moment the landlord entered the room.

"A letter has just been left for you, Miss Blanco," he said.

The lady thanked him as she took it, and then Perkins retreated.

It was a notification from the Red Dragon Mining Company that an assessment of twenty dollars a share had been levied, payable in ten days.

"In ten days, eh?" said Blake, after Catalina had finished the reading of the notice to him. "Well, I heard an actor say in a play once, in ten days there is time to win ten battles; it wasn't ten days that he said, but that is near enough."

"Let me see," the Fresh continued, reflectively. "There are six thousand dollars to be raised in ten days. Pretty large amount, and a rather short time, but there is no telling what a man can do until he tries. Keep your courage up! You shall not be robbed of your property if a bold fight can stop the scheme from going through. These lawyers are cunning fellows, and if the scene of battle was inside of civilization—in some city where the legal sharks usually settle matters of this kind—I don't think there would be much show for you, but in a rough country like this, one good man, with a pair of revolvers, is worth a dozen lawyers in a fight of this kind."

"I understand; you are going to make it a personal matter," the girl exclaimed, the bright color rising to her cheeks. "But you must not encounter danger for my sake! It is not right that you should risk your life in my quarrel!"

"Oh, don't you worry about that," Blake replied. "I think too much of my life to risk it without all the chances are in my favor. But I must be going now; all I wanted to find out was if notice of the election had been served upon you," and Blake rose.

"You will be sure not to needlessly expose yourself to danger?" Catalina exclaimed, quite anxiously. "I would rather lose the money than to have you, whose friendship I value so highly, injured."

"Don't you worry about that; I am a master-hand at taking care of myself," the Sport replied, smilingly, and then he departed.

Little did the girl, thus reassured, suspect that

he was going straight home to wait for a hostile challenge.

Leaving the Fresh to pursue his way, we will return to the Cuban, Gomes.

Sanches was waiting for him without the works, and great was the astonishment of that gentleman when he was informed of what had occurred.

"Upon my word this man is what the Americans call a terror," Sanches remarked, as the two proceeded down the trail to the town.

"Yes, he handled the two lawyers without gloves."

"But they are not satisfied?"

"No; would you be under like circumstances?"

"By all the fiends! I think not!" Sanches exclaimed. "If I had been pounded in such an outrageous manner, I would not rest content until I had the heart's blood of the man who had abused me."

"Exactly, and that is the way the general feels about the matter. He has satisfied himself that with his fists he stands no chance with this ruffian, and so he is anxious to meet him with the revolver."

"Will it not be the old story of out of the frying-pan into the fire?" Sanches asked reflectively.

"As to that I cannot really say, but I do not think it is possible that the fellow can be an expert with weapons as he is with his fists; when it comes to boxing in this American style he is a regular demon," Gomes remarked. "This is not the first time that he has distinguished himself in this line, and he has whipped far better men than the general."

"Yes, I have heard it said that there is no man in the camp who is a match for him, but I do not take much interest in this brutal American boxing," Sanches continued. "When men fight, they should fight like gentlemen and not like dogs."

"My own idea, but most of these Americans are brutes," Gomes assented.

And as the Cuban spoke, in his mind came the remembrance of how he had once, in a moment of anger, attempted to assault the Sport, and the speedy manner in which he was laid upon his back, and kept there until the Fresh succeeded in showing him that he was making a fool of himself.

"I say, this Tombstone man is playing right into your hands," Sanches remarked, abruptly.

"You mean by challenging Blake?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps so, yet I am not sure whether he is my rival or not," Gomes replied, thoughtfully.

"My dear Francisco, there is not a doubt of it!" the other exclaimed. "Look at the matter with unprejudiced eyes. The lady rejects your suit and even the threatened loss of her fortune does not move her. And then, in the hour of her trouble, who does she seek—you, the man with whom she has always been on friendly terms, who she knows is in love with her, and whose love would make him ready to serve her in any way? Oh, no, she does not come to you, but seeks this miserable sport."

"Great heavens! do you not see? It is one of those delusions under which young girls sometimes labor. The man has bewitched her, and until he is out of the way you will not stand any chance of winning the girl."

"Perhaps you are right," Gomes replied, in a gloomy way. "But the man does not act like a lover. I will be on the watch though, and if he is not killed in this fight with the general, I will not rest until I have discovered the truth."

"You are right! That is the proper course to take!" Sanches declared. "And if you find that he has deceived you—that he is the lover of Catalina, then you ought to kill him with as little mercy as you would show to a mad-dog which crosses your path. You can depend upon me, you know, if you require aid. Your cause is mine, and if you say the word I will give this fellow his death with my own hand."

Gomes was touched by this proof of his friend's devotion and extended his hand to him which the other warmly pressed.

"For the present we will simply watch and wait," Gomes remarked. "If Blake does not fall in this fight, then we can act if there is a love affair between him and Catalina. One thing is certain; he shall never have the girl while I live."

By this time the pair had turned into the narrow trail which led to the Wildcat Mine and but a few more words passed between them until the mine was reached.

Blake and Dave Ringwood were seated on the tree-trunk playing cards as usual.

The Cuban delivered the challenge and the Sport referred him to Ringwood who was to act as his second.

The arrangements for the fight were soon made.

The meeting was fixed to take place on the following morning at six o'clock; a sandy plain, by the river, about half a mile south of the town was the spot chosen for the fight, and revolvers were to be the weapons; furthermore it was agreed that neither of the duelists were to be accompanied by more than four friends.

The particulars settled, the Cuban departed, hastening to report the result of this mission.

The general was satisfied.

"If I don't settle him my name is Dennis!" he declared.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEXICAN AND CATALINA.

WHEN the Mexican-looking stranger, who called himself Black John, arrived at Slide-Out he rode slowly along the street until he came to the hotel, then he halted and cast an inquiring glance around as if he wished to assure himself that this was the principal hotel of the camp.

After satisfying himself in this point he rode to the corral at the back of the hotel and gave his horse to the stableman.

Entering the hotel he accosted the landlord, Perkins, who was in his usual place behind the bar.

"How are you? Are you the landlord?"

"Yes sir, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I reckon I will stop with you for a while," Black John answered.

"All right; I will be glad to accommodate you."

"I understand that you have got a pretty lively camp here."

"It is not as lively now as it has been and will be in a month or so," the landlord replied. "Our principal mine, the Red Dragon, has been shut down for a while, but in a couple of weeks it will be going again, and then the town will be lively enough."

"Ah, yes, the Red Dragon," the stranger remarked in a reflective way. "I have heard of that property, and I understand that it is one of the richest strikes that has ever been made in Arizona."

"Yes, I reckon it is as good as any, but it is one of them mines which takes a deal of money to work, and, so far, it has not panned out as it ought to have done, but things now look as if she would pay mighty well when she gets to running again."

"The proprietor is an old friend of mine and that is why I came to the camp. I thought he would be able to put me in the way of making a good strike," Black John explained.

"Ah yes, I see; to which man do you refer—General Clairborne or the Mexican, Del Santo?"

Black John shook his head.

"No, I do not know either of the gentlemen, nor was I aware that they were interested in the mine. It is the Marquis De Belleville of whom I speak."

"Oh, I reckon you ain't heard what has happened then?" the landlord exclaimed in surprise.

"I do not know to what you refer, but, of course, I have no knowledge of anything appertaining to the town excepting that I met the Marquis De Belleville some time ago in Chihuahua; he told me that he had made a big strike in this valley and advised me if I ever had a notion to put any money into mining, to come up here."

"The marquis has gone bust in the worst way," Perkins explained. "Got into a heap of trouble and had to clear out."

"You astonish me!" the other exclaimed.

"It is a fact, sure as you're born! A couple of lawyers, General Wash Clairborne, from Tombstone and Senor Estervan Del Santo, of Durango, who came here on behalf of the American and Mexican creditors, have got hold of the property now, and I should not be at all surprised if they made a big thing out of it, for they have plenty of money at their back."

"I am truly sorry to hear of the marquis's downfall," the Mexican observed, with an air of regret. "Of course he was merely a casual acquaintance, but as he seemed to be a genial, whole-souled fellow he made a deep impression upon me."

"Yes, he was a wise man. I allers get along splendidly with him, and never had no trouble. I reckon he would be here now all right if a Sport named Blake hadn't come to town and locked horns with the marquis. The two had it hot and heavy from the time the Sport struck the camp. De Belleville tried to fire him out, but the sport wouldn't have it; then the marquis's treasure train was robbed, and the money that he relied upon to pay his creditors taken."

"And was that the work of the Sport?" Black John demanded.

"Hush!" cried the landlord in alarm, "you mustn't talk right out in meeting like that! This Sport, Blake, is the freshest rooster that ever walked on two legs in this world; he's allers spiling for a fight and if he heered that you said anything like that 'bout him he would be sart'in to go for you so durned quick that it would make your head swim!"

"Ah, yes, I see, a man must be cautious."

"You bet!" the landlord declared, emphatically.

"Well, 'bout this here robbery business. The marquis felt sure that the Sport was at the bottom of it, and said so, but he hadn't any proof, 'cept that Blake and he were enemies."

"Yes, of course, unless the robbers were caught it would be a difficult matter to prove that any one particular man had a hand in the affair. But what has become of De Belleville's wife? She was a charming woman; I met her

at the time I made the acquaintance of the marquis and there was also a lovely young girl with them—a relative, I believe, but I was not lucky enough to be introduced to her!"

"Ah, yes, Miss Blanco."

"That was the name."

"She is here, stopping with me. But Madame De Belleville, poor soul! She's dead."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, and there were ugly rumors that the marquis had something to do with her death. De Belleville was all broke up, you see, and when a man gets in that condition everybody is ready to give him a kick to help him down the hill."

"It is the way of the world."

"Anyhow the marquis didn't stay to force the charge, but cleared out, and I reckon nobody in the camp knows whether he is dead or alive."

"Nor cares, I presume. But as to this young lady, I should really like to have a talk with you. Perhaps she needs friends and I would gladly aid her, although I cannot with justice claim that I was more than a chance acquaintance of the Marquis and Madame De Belleville."

"Oh, I don't doubt that she will be glad to see you, and I reckon she needs friends, too, the worst way; I will take a message up to her," the landlord replied.

The Mexican gave his name, the landlord departed, and in a few minutes returned with the information that Miss Blanco awaited him in the parlor, then he conducted the stranger into that apartment.

After introducing the Mexican the landlord discreetly withdrew.

To Catalina the stranger told the same tale which he had confided to the landlord, and wound up by saying that as he understood she was without protection, he had been moved to see if he could be of assistance to her in any way.

The Mexican was evidently a man of breeding and education; he had a polished way with him despite his rough dress, but although Catalina was an extremely innocent girl, and not given to suspicion, yet there was something about the man that she did not like, and which impelled her to refrain from giving him her confidence.

So she politely thanked him for his offer, and said that if at any time she needed a service at his hands she would not fail to remember his kindness.

"I was astounded at learning of the misfortunes which had overtaken the Marquis De Belleville," the stranger remarked. "Although I cannot claim the honor of being his friend, as our acquaintance was only a limited one, yet I took a decided interest in him, and these strange stories that are current in this camp in regard to the marquis, fill me with amazement. Can it be possible that there is any truth in them?"

Innocent girl though she was, Catalina was shrewd enough to comprehend that the stranger was striving to ascertain what she thought in regard to the matter, but as she had no wish to conceal her impressions upon the subject she spoke frankly.

"I do not wish to sit in judgment upon the marquis," she said. "I am not sufficiently well acquainted with the world to do that, besides it is a task from which I naturally shrink. The marquis was always kind to me, and the thought that it is possible that he was guilty of the crimes of which he was charged is a hateful one; I would be willing to give almost anything if I could dismiss it from my mind."

"You do not believe that he is guilty, then?" the Mexican asked, in a subtle, insinuating way.

"I do not know what to think," the girl answered. "The proofs against him seem to be terribly strong, and then his abrupt flight, just as if he dared not face the accusations, would go far to convince any one who looked at the matter with an unprejudiced eye that he was not an innocent man."

"Yes, it does seem so," the Mexican admitted.

"And yet when you come to think of it, the records of courts are full of instances where innocent men have grown terror-stricken at the net of evidence which has been skillfully woven around them, and fled in terror."

"As far as I can see, the marquis was persistently attacked by this Sport, Blake, and to his bloodhound-like pursuit he owes his ruin."

"The marquis was to blame in the first instance, for it was he that attacked Mr. Blake, and in the beginning all he did was to defend himself."

"Ah, I see; I have not heard the story rightly," the Mexican explained, and after a few more words withdrew.

His brows were dark with anger when the door closed behind him.

"It is as I feared," he muttered. "This scoundrel of a Sport has won her over to his side. Probably he means to marry her, but he little dreams of the blow which I can deal him!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAMP IS SURPRISED.

The duel had been arranged to take place at an early hour, so that there would not be any

chance of the affair being interrupted by the presence of a crowd, and it was for this reason that the agreement was made that there should be only four friends allowed on each side. By taking these precautions it was thought that the affair could be kept quiet, but there is an old saying to the effect that the best laid schemes of mice and men don't always work, and it was so in this instance.

There was a "leaky vessel" in the case.

Gomes was a quiet, well-behaved fellow, not partial to liquor or any form of dissipation, but Sanches, on the contrary, was "one of the boys," but he managed so slyly that his companion never suspected that he was anything but the steadiest fellow in the world.

Gomes knew that his countryman both drank and played cards, but he had not the slightest suspicion that he was in the habit of drinking to excess, and gambling while he had a coin in his pocket to stake.

Sanches was a man with a head of iron. It took a deal of liquor to affect him, and even when he had all the cargo on board that he was able to carry, a stranger would have to be an excellent judge of mankind to suspect that he was in liquor. He was one of those men whose legs never got drunk.

On the night of the day when the arrangements for the duel took place, the Cubans went to the camp to hear the gossip of the day as usual.

They stayed at the hotel until about ten, and then Gomes returned to the mine. Sanches had gone away with some acquaintances, and the other supposed he had returned to his cabin; but it was not so, for the Cuban had got into a little poker game in Major Pete Houston's State of Texas Saloon, and as he was a winner, fortune smiling most favorably upon him, he did not feel at all disposed to give up and go home.

And as he gambled he drank, and flushed with the liquor and his unusual success at cards—for, as a rule, Sanches was a most unlucky gambler—he confided to his associates the news that a duel had been arranged for the next morning between General Wash Clairborne and the Sport, Blake, and then, delighted with the impression that this news made, he went on and related with great gusto the particulars of the fight which had taken place between the Fresh and the two lawyers.

It had been a source of wonderment to the gossips of the camp that neither the Tombstone man nor the Mexican had made their appearance down-town that evening as had been their custom to do.

The mystery was explained now. The pair had determined to keep out of sight until the marks of the punishment they had received from the Sport were not quite so perceptible as at present.

Of course such a choice bit of news as this was not long in circulating throughout the town, and within an hour after Sanches disclosed the secret there were few people in Slide-Out but what knew of the particulars of the affair, and a large majority of the citizens decided that it was their duty to be on hand when the duel took place, for it was the general impression that the fight would be one well worth seeing.

Blake and Ringwood came down-town about eight o'clock as was their usual custom and joined a little card-party which usually met every evening in the parlor of the hotel.

The playing could hardly be called gambling, for the stakes were so small—merely enough to make the game interesting—that a player, even with the worst of luck, could hardly lose enough to worry him.

At eleven o'clock the pards rose to go home.

By this time the news of the duel had spread widely through the town, and, as the pards made their appearance in the saloon they at once became the center of attraction.

Neither of the two were men deficient in observation and they immediately observed that they were the target of all eyes.

The miners stared at the pair, open-mouthed, just as if they had been some rare show.

"What is up, Blake?" Dave Ringwood asked.

"The boys are staring at us as though we were monsters with two heads."

"The story of my fight with the two lawyers has got out, I reckon, and, maybe, somebody has posted the town about the duel and the boys know that I am going to fight the Tombstone man in the morning."

"I reckon that is it."

The pards were making their way toward the door when Old Ben Prince of the Tomatocan claim, so-called to distinguish him from another Ben Prince who didn't own a mine and was a worthless fellow generally, barred their progress.

"Pard, put it thar!" he exclaimed, extending his brawny hand. "Put yer paw right in thar and let me give you one good grip jest for luck! This hyer camp of Slide-Out is proud of you, she is, and don't you forget it!"

"I am glad to hear it," the Fresh responded.

"And you are carrying the money of the town too. You must remember that and brace up when you go for this lawyer galoot. The

odds are six to four on you and mighty few takers too, do you mind?"

"I'm offering seven to four an' divil a man kin I find to take me up!" roared a big fellow, known as Howling Mike O'Toole.

This man, shortly after Blake's appearance in the town, had encountered the Sport while on the war-path one day and went in to show him that he was the big chief of Slide-Out, but Blake took the conceit out of him in short order, and ever since that time the Irishman had the utmost respect for Blake's powers.

It was a liberal offer that Howling Mike made, but the principal reason, probably, why it was not accepted, was that the majority of the miners had not faith enough in the big Irishman to believe he would pay if he lost.

These words showed the pards that Blake's surmise in regard to the interest manifested in them was correct.

"I am very much obliged to you all, gentlemen," the Sport remarked. "And I will do my best to come out a winner and so justify the confidence that you gentlemen have in me."

"You will do it, every time! Thar's no doubt 'bout it!" Old Ben Prince exclaimed in the tones of an enthusiast. "Tombstone may be a pretty lively town—I never was thar and so ain't able to say for sure, but I have allers heard she made mighty big bluffs, but when it came to one of her sharps tackling a chief in this hyer town, it is dollars to cents that Slide-Out ain't a-going to get left."

There was a universal chorus of assents to this.

Then Prince insisted on the pards taking a drink with him to the toast of "Bad luck to Tombstone and her chiefs."

Blake would have got out of it if he could, but he saw that if he refused it would give mortal offense to the crowd, all of whom seemed desirous of seeing him conquer the general, so he consented to take just one drink, for, as he explained, it was his rule on the eve of a contest of this kind to keep his head clear and not indulge in any excesses which might have a bad effect upon him.

The crowd accepted the condition, declaring the reasons which dictated it to be "good enough!"

The toast was duly drank and then with a general handshake all around the pards departed.

After getting in the street the pair took the homeward road, but after they had proceeded a dozen steps Blake laid his hand upon his companion's arm and said:

"Stop a moment, pard, I am a little puzzled about something and I want to satisfy myself."

The two halted; they were at the upper corner of the hotel building.

"What is it?"

"Did you notice, when we stood up to the bar taking a drink, a swarthy, black-bearded fellow who sat at a table at the end of the room and appeared to be regarding us with considerable interest?"

"No, I did not notice him."

"I did; he is a stranger; looks like a Mexican, and the moment I caught his eyes fixed on my face, something whispered to me that he was my foe."

"That was odd."

"Yes; I have jumped to a conclusion of that kind half a dozen times—more, maybe, in my life—and I have never been wrong in a single instance."

"That is odder still."

"It has been a mighty useful gift to me, I can tell you. Another thing: It seems to me that this man is one whom I have met before and yet I cannot remember when or where, and that fact bothers me, for my memory is seldom at fault."

"Probably after awhile it will come to you," Ringwood suggested.

"Well, it may, and it may not," the Sport replied, dubiously. "As a rule, I can place any man I have ever seen the moment I strike him. But I want to get another look at the man. Let us go around to the side window."

Through the casement they were able to command a view of the stranger.

As the reader has undoubtedly anticipated, it was the horseman, Black John.

The pair studied the face of the man intently for a few moments.

"His face seems familiar to me, but it is a common one; and I have seen a dozen Mexicans who resembled him," Ringwood observed.

"It is strange the impression I have got of him; it is not often that I am taken in this way," the Sport declared. "I will have to keep an eye upon him until I satisfy my mind."

Then the two turned away and proceeded on their homeward route.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE MORNING.

GENERAL WASH CLAIRBORNE came of good old Southern stock, and prided himself upon being a fire-eater.

He was one of the men who was always ready to take the field in defense of "my honor, sah!" but, for all that, he was not a rash, hot-headed enthusiast.

The lesson which the Sport had given him, and the man from Durango, made a deep impression, and the promptness with which Blake accepted his challenge caused him to think that it was possible the Sport was as good a man with a revolver as he had shown himself to be with his fists.

In order to satisfy his mind in regard to this point, so that he should not be caught napping, Clairborne dispatched his confidential clerk and general man-of-all-work to ascertain just what kind of a reputation the Sport had as a warrior.

This clerk, Billy Gibbons by name, was a dapper little fellow, with a shrewd, insinuating way, and had among those who knew him, the reputation of being as smart as a steel-trap.

A better man to dispatch upon such an errand could not have been found. With his easy, plausible way the fellow was a natural-born detective.

As the coming fight was the general topic of conversation in the camp, it was an easy matter for Gibbons to learn what the miners thought about the Sport.

His report was to the effect that it was the general opinion Blake would win the "shooting-match." The state of the betting showed this, for the Sport was freely backed by all the betting men of the town, who were eager to give odds that he would come out first best.

"Yes, but on what do these betting sharps base their willingness to give odds?" the general asked, immediately proceeding with all a lawyer's acuteness to get at the roots of the matter. "Is it merely sentiment on their part? Do they back Blake because he is a townsman while I am a stranger, or because he is known as a desperado, handy with his weapons, while they suppose that I, being a lawyer and a man of consequence, would not be apt to be gifted in that line?"

"The main idea, as far as I could find out, is because Blake is believed to be an excessively lucky man," the clerk replied. "He came to the camp a total stranger, and in some way managed to incur the ill-will of the Marquis De Belleville, who then reigned over the camp like a king with a body-guard—a police force—who made it lively for any one who attempted to dispute his will, but Blake wouldn't stand any nonsense from either the marquis or his police; he whipped the best fighting-men that could be brought against him, and finally managed to run the marquis out of the town."

"Yes, I know that," the general remarked. "I was here at the time when the marquis left between two days; there is no doubt that he was a grand rascal, and that this man, Blake, was instrumental in his overthrow. But here is the point: has the Sport ever showed that he was an extra good pistol-shot, or are the sharps just going on the broad principle that as he is known to be an extra good man with his fists it is certain that he cannot be beaten when it comes to weapons?"

"Well, that is about the idea, I reckon," the other replied. "As far as I could find out he has never proved that he was an extraordinary pistol-shot. Of course, there are all sorts of wild tales floating around about how he can snuff a candle, drive a nail, shoot the neck off of a bottle, or a coin out of a man's hand, and a lot of trash of that kind, but as far as I could find out, no one in the camp knows much about his abilities in the shooting line."

This information afforded decided satisfaction to the general. He knew he was a good shot, and unless his opponent was one of those wonderful marksmen, so few and far between, he stood a good chance of "winging" his antagonist in the fight.

Like a prudent man, however, he resolved to make the fight a sure thing for him, so he put in a couple of hours that afternoon at target practice, and was delighted to discover that though it had been some time since he had practiced revolver-shooting, he had not grown materially rusty. It was then with a mind tolerably free from uneasiness that Clairborne retired to rest that night.

He rose bright and early in the morning and, in company with Del Santo, Gibbons and the two Cubans, Gomes and Sanches, started in good season for the battle-ground.

The party went by a roundabout way, so as to avoid passing through the camp and thus attracting notice, though, as Gomes remarked, when the matter was discussed:

"It doesn't make much difference; everybody in the town knows that there is going to be a fight, and it is well understood where it is to take place."

"That is the work of this Sport and his friends, of course," the general observed. "Men of that kind can never hold their tongues. Then, doubtless, he has invited all his acquaintances to be present, anticipating a triumph."

"Well, I don't know about that," Gomes replied. "I do not like the man, and never have liked him, but this I will say, there is nothing of the boaster or braggart about him."

The general admitted that Blake was unlike the usual frontier desperado, who went about like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour.

When the party arrived on the battle-ground they were rather amazed to discover that about

all the miners for twenty miles around were present.

The men had knocked off work and taken a holiday so as to see the fight.

Such a show did not happen every day, and they were not willing to miss the opportunity.

Blake and his second, Dave Ringwood, were already on the field, and even the almond-eyed son of the far East, the guileless Hop Hi Gee, was present.

The new-comers advanced to where the two sports were seated on a boulder which cropped out of the earth.

The crowd, which was clustered around the pair, fell back as the general and his party came up.

Blake and Ringwood rose as the others approached.

"This does not look much like carrying out the agreement in regard to there being only four men on a side," Clairborne remarked, nodding to the crowd.

"Well, as far as I am concerned, I have only two men with me," Blake replied. "Mr. Ringwood, my second, and Major Houston here," and he pointed to the tall Texan who stood a little to one side.

"The major is the only medical sharp that there is in the camp at present," Blake explained. "And although there wasn't anything said about a doctor, yet I thought it would be handy to have one on hand."

"Well, isn't this crowd with you?" Clairborne asked.

"No, sir, no more with me than with you, for they were on the ground when we came," the Sport replied.

"I was aware that the fact that we were to fight had leaked out in some way, but I was not prepared to have the encounter turned into a circus," the general exclaimed, angrily.

"Sir, you must not attempt to lay the blame upon me," Blake rejoined. "I had no more to do with these people being present than you have, but I will admit that as far as I am concerned, it does not make the slightest difference to me. This is a free country, and I have no objections to their looking on. It is all one to me whether there are four witnesses or four hundred."

"Well, I confess I don't admire being made a circus of, but I presume there is no help for it now," the general remarked. "The men are here, and, of course, they intend to stay until the show is over. The only thing we could do would be to postpone our meeting, and I am in no humor for that."

"Neither am I," Blake responded, dryly. "And I reckon that if we attempted to fool our fellow-citizens by any such game as that, they would be apt to mob us before we could get back to the camp."

"Oh, I am willing that they should be satisfied, as far as I am concerned," Clairborne said, stiffly. "I am all ready, Mr. Gomes, as soon as you make the necessary arrangements," and then the general, accompanied by Del Santo, marched off to another clump of boulders, and the two sat down.

Blake resumed his seat, and the seconds, Gomes and Ringwood, held a conference.

The ground was so level and fair that there was no choice in regard to positions.

It was settled that the distance was to be thirty paces, and the signal, the dropping of a hat, the combatants being previously asked if they were ready, and warned that the signal was about to be given.

A single exchange of shots only, and both parties to keep their positions.

Major Pete Houston was selected to give the signal, which he agreed to do to the best of his ability, and as he was an old hand at this sort of thing, there was no doubt he was just the man for the place.

These particulars being arranged, the contestants were placed in position.

"Now then, gentlemen, are you all ready?" Major Pete asked, removing his broad-brimmed hat.

"All ready," responded the Sport and the speculator almost in a breath.

"I am about to give the signal, so keep your eyes peeled," the veteran announced. "One, two, three!" And with the last word down went the hat.

The opponents had taken careful aim at each other, but in this matter were a little disturbed by having to keep their eyes upon the major, to watch the hat.

Two shots rung out on the air, while the anxious spectators held their breath for a moment.

CHAPTER XVI. THE RESULT.

BLAKE had been the first to fire.

Although the camp of Slide-Out knew it not, for he had never displayed any of his wonderful skill as a marksman since taking up his residence in the town, yet he was one of those splendid shots whose exploits with fire-arms seem to border on the marvelous.

He bore no particular grudge against the Tombstone lawyer; he regarded him as a scheming rascal, and had made up his mind to baffle him in his design to "freeze out" Catalina and

rob her of her mining stock; then, when the man had attacked him, he had hammered the lawyer until he was glad to cry enough, but he did not desire to take his life.

There was nothing of the bloodthirsty desperado about the Sport. He never killed for the mere pleasure of killing, and although, owing to his peculiar nature he was always interfering in matters which did not really concern him—getting into fights, which he might avoid by merely passing by on the other side of the way, yet, unless it was to save his own life, he never attempted to take that of his adversary.

It was his design always to wound and disable and not to kill.

So, in this case, taking it for granted that the Tombstone lawyer was a fine shot—an extra good marksman—or else he would not have been so ready to challenge him to the field, he hastened to fire the moment the signal was given, shrewdly conjecturing that his opponent would be apt to dwell a little on his fire, and he had aimed so as to put his ball in the outstretched arm which was leveling the revolver.

The affair turned out exactly as Blake had anticipated.

Clairborne saw the flash of the Sport's pistol and hastened to fire before he was ready; his aim was spoilt and the bullet did not go within a yard of the mark; but Blake's ball cut a channel from the wrist to the elbow and then plunged into Clairborne's shoulder.

The general staggered back a step or two, his arm dropped to his side and the revolver fell to the ground.

"He's hit hard!" was the half-suppressed whisper that came from the throats of fully one half of the bystanders.

Gomes hastened to the side of his wounded principal.

"Are you hit?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, the fellow has ripped my arm and I reckon I have got the ball in my shoulder, for it hurts like blazes!" the general replied.

"You cannot take another shot?"

"No, not this evening—some other evening—oh!" and the lawyer shut his teeth tightly together to suppress a groan, wrung from him by the intense pain.

Gomes beckoned to Major Houston and he immediately hurried to the spot.

Ringwood had approached the Sport.

"I reckon the affair is over, pard?" he remarked.

"I reckon it is. I aimed to disable him, so that he could not claim another shot, and from the way he acted it is big odds that my bullet went true."

"I will see about the matter," and then Ringwood hurried to where the major was attending to the general.

Houston had ripped the general's sleeves open so as to examine the wound.

"Oh, it is not so bad," he remarked, after locating the ball in the shoulder. "It is an ugly scratch, but not at all dangerous. The ball is just under the skin; shall I take it out?"

"I suppose so, if you think it best," the general replied.

And take it out the major did with his pen-knife—a rough bit of surgery that made the lawyer wince with pain.

"There's the lead, better in my hand than in your flesh," the Texan remarked. "I've a little salve hyer—the best thing in the world for a scratch of this kind. I'll bandage the thing up, and in a week or so you will be all right."

The application of the ointment made the general swear softly to himself, for, as he explained, the wound, when touched, smarted as though the flesh was being seared with a red-hot poker.

Ringwood approached as the major was attending to the arm.

"Do you demand another shot?" he asked of Gomes, with a bow to the general.

"No, sir; my principal is not able to hold a weapon; his right arm is disabled."

"Then the affair may be considered at an end for the present?"

"Yes, sir," Gomes replied.

"If the general is not satisfied with the result of this encounter, at any time in the future I am sure my principal will be willing to give him his revenge."

Then there was an exchange of ceremonious bows, and Ringwood returned to Blake.

"The firin' is over, pard," Ringwood murmured. "He has got all he wants for the present. Your shot has completely disabled his right arm, and I reckon it will be a month or two before it will be much use to him."

"That was my game; I did not seek the life of the man, only to give him a warning," Blake remarked. "If he has any sense he ought to know by this time that it would have been just as easy for me to put the ball through his head as into his arm. I hope he will have gumption enough to understand that, and not run away with the idea that it was merely a chance shot."

"This is the first blow in the fight for the mine, and I want him to comprehend that when I hit I hit hard."

"He is no fool; I reckon he sees now, if he did not before, that even if he is in possession of the mine, and has the law at his back, he hasn't se-

cured such a big advantage as it would be in a different kind of a region from this."

"If he don't understand now he will before long, I reckon," Blake replied, and then the two pards departed.

The majority of the crowd followed on their heels, and there was a great disposition to make a time over the Sport's victory when the camp was reached, so it was hard work for the pards to get away from their admirers.

The general's party did not return by way of the camp but took the roundabout course which they had pursued in coming to the battle-field.

There was very little conversation during the return trip, for the spirits of the party were depressed, but when they came in sight of the mine the general who, despite the pains of his wound, was keeping "a stiff upper lip," as the saying is, remarked:

"Here we are home again; we went for wool and have returned shorn."

"This fellow has the luck of the devil!" Gomes exclaimed in a bitter tone.

"Well, Gomes, old fellow, I am not so sure that it was luck," Clairborne replied. "To my thinking it was calculation."

"Do you think he designed to wound you in the arm?" the Cuban asked.

"That is my idea to a hair," the general answered. "I believe the fellow is one of those dead-shots who can hit a man wherever he likes. To my thinking it would have been just as easy for him to put a bullet through my heart as into my arm."

"Why did he not do it then?" Gomes demanded.

"Why should he? Really, when you come right down to it, why should he seek my life except to protect his own; he anticipated my fire, spoilt my aim, and stood in no greater danger from my revolver than if I was about to throw the weapon at him. All he wanted to do was to give me warning that he was a dangerous man, and if I tried any monkey business with him I would be apt to get hurt. And I am satisfied, I am; nothing of the hog about me, gentlemen, I always know when I get enough."

"This man must expect to always triumph," Gomes remarked in a gloomy way. "There will come a time when some foe will cross his path whom he will not conquer."

"Oh, yes, that is likely; no man in the world is so strong that he is not likely to meet one who is stronger; but, as far as Blake is concerned, I am satisfied that he is too strong for me, and I shall steer clear of him in the future; I should admire any man too, after the experience I have had, who wants to try conclusions with this Sport to get a good ready on before he starts."

By this time the party were at the door of the Red Dragon office, and there the party separated.

The Cubans and Gibbons went down to the camp, anxious to hear what the town had to say about the fight, while the lawyers entered the building.

The general stretched himself upon the rude bunk which was in a corner of the room and Del Santo took a seat by the side of it.

"Thank the Lord I am at rest at last!" the general exclaimed after lying down, an operation which cost him some groans. "I thought I should faint from the pain a half-a-dozen times on the way home. Fill me out a good stiff glass of whisky, will you?"

Del Santo did so, and Clairborne swallowed it at a single draught.

"Ah! that puts some life in me!"

"But, I say, general, do you really propose not to seek revenge upon this scoundrel?" the Mexican asked.

"Curse the fellow!" Clairborne cried, "I will never be satisfied until I have his heart's blood! But I must play a cautious game. I bear him no malice, oh, no! that is the way I talk, you know; we are not strong enough to fight him openly, but the first chance I get to deal him a blow in the back, you may depend upon it that I will strike with all my strength. This world is not big enough to hold both of us hereafter, and either he or I must die!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCLOSURE.

AMONG the spectators who had been present to witness the defeat of the lawyer, and the triumph of the Sport, was the Mexican, Black John, and when the crowd followed Blake from the field, he came slowly along in the rear.

That his thoughts were not pleasant ones, was apparent from the dark look upon his swarthy face.

"This man has the skill of a demon and the luck of an angel!" he exclaimed, communing with himself.

"It is but the height of folly for any man to think of contending with him in a fair and open fight. To do so would be but to throw one's life away. He can only be conquered by secret cunning, and it is my game to get others to strike the blow rather than to risk the task myself."

On arriving at the camp, the Mexican proceeded to the Mule Pass Saloon, where he found Kid Mitchel and Slippery Smith. He pretended not to know them, and as they were the only

men in the saloon, invited them up to take a drink after the hospitable fashion of the frontier.

He thus managed to get into conversation with them without exciting suspicion that he had met them before.

"Did you see the fight?" the Mexican asked.

"Oh, yes, you kin bet all yer rocks that I never miss a picnic of that kind," Kid Mitchel replied.

"You bet we took it in!" Slippery Smith asserted.

"This Sport is a good man," Black John remarked reflectively.

"Wal, yes, but that ar' shot was jest by chance, you know!" Kid Mitchel asserted. "If I had the money to back my say-so up, I would be willing to go a big pile that he couldn't do it ag'in, nohow!"

Then a sudden idea came to the Mexican, suggested by the words of the ruffian.

It was evident that Kid Mitchel had taken a dislike to the Sport, and was not willing to admit that he was an extra good man.

"The shot was only accidental you think?" Black John asked.

"If I had the rocks I would go big money on to it!" the other declared.

"So would I!" Slippery Smith coincided; never being much troubled by an opinion of his own he was always ready to agree with his pard.

"The miners evidently think he is an extra good man; just see how he hammered the two lawyers; didn't you notice how their faces were disfigured—the face of the Durango man in particular?" Black John said.

"Oh, yes, but what does that amount to?" Kid Mitchel cried in contempt. "What does either one of those two duffers know about putting up their dukes? Of course it was a reg'lar picnic for the Sport. He knew how to handle himself a little—most all the sports are up to that—and it war jest play for him to knock 'em out, but jest you let him try a game of that kind on a cove like me and see how he will come out."

"You think you would not have any difficulty in handling him then?"

"I have fit thirty reg'lar prize fights in my time and I never was licked in no one ov 'em!" Kid Mitchel declared, throwing his massive chest out with considerable pride.

"Well, if you are a match for this Sport, Blake, there is a chance for you to make some money out of the affair," Black John suggested.

"How so?" Kid Mitchel inquired.

"If thar's a chance for a stake, Kid is the boyee who will be quick to grab it!" Slippery Smith declared.

"I think there is a prospect for big money," Black John said. "After this defeat both the lawyers will be glad of an opportunity to strike a blow at the Sport, and they are not likely to attempt to do anything themselves. Now, if I was to go to them and say, there is a good man in the town who will be glad of a chance to show Blake that he is not the best man in the camp, provided there is some money in it for him, the odds are big, to my thinking, that they would be glad to put up a big stake."

The eyes of the bruiser sparkled and he rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"Now, pard, I reckon you have got the thing dead to rights. Of course they will want somebody to climb the Sport, and I am jest the boy who kin do the job up brown too, only go for as big a stake as you kin."

"You can depend upon me for that!" Black John assented. "And as both these lawyers are rich men it is not likely that they will care what it costs so long as Blake is well pounded."

"Bless yer life!" the bruiser exclaimed, "I will hammer him so that arter I git through with him his own mother wouldn't know the cove."

"All right! I will see about the matter as soon as I can."

And then the three took another turn at the bar, drinking success to their enterprise, after which the Mexican took his departure.

"This fellow ought to be able to defeat the Sport, for boxing is his trade," Black John mused, as he took his way back to the hotel.

He had taken pains to inquire concerning the two men with whom he had formed an alliance. Slippery Smith had formerly been a resident of the camp, so the Mexican easily ascertained all he wished to know in regard to both of the men.

After reaching the hotel the Mexican remained in the saloon, conversing with the miners in regard to the stirring events of the day, until the Cubans made their appearance.

This was what he was waiting for; he had an idea that after going to the mine with the wounded man Gomes would come down-town to the hotel.

He managed to get into conversation with the superintendent, and pretended to believe that he had met him once in the City of Mexico, but as Gomes said he had never been there, the Mexican expressed great wonder that he could have made such a mistake.

Then he further explained that at the time he supposed he had met Gomes he had been in com-

pany with Isabel Escobedo, afterward the wife of the Marquis De Belleville.

"And she had her niece with her at the time, Miss Blanco," the Mexican continued. "But I was not lucky enough to secure an introduction to Miss Catalina, which I very much regret as everybody said she was a charming girl."

"Miss Blanco is now in the camp," Gomes remarked.

"Yes, I had the pleasure of an interview with her. When I came here I was much amazed to learn that Madame De Belleville was dead and the marquis gone, no one knew where, and I sought Miss Blanco thinking she could tell me something about the marquis. I felt interested in his fate although he was but a casual acquaintance."

"Yes, the marquis was a man who had the gift of making friends."

"Well, as I said, I was not well-acquainted with him, but I knew his wife, and all her family: the Escobedos are numerous in the Chihuahua district where I came from. Miss Blanco was born on a ranch a few miles from that old Mexican city."

"Is that true?" the Cuban asked.

"Oh, yes; why, is it not generally known?"

"No, the marquis and his wife always were reluctant to speak about the girl's history, and when it was touched upon usually turned the conversation into another channel."

"Ah, yes, I can understand that; it is a painful subject, particularly as long as this Sport, Blake, was in the town," the Mexican assented with a knowing shake of the head.

Gomes was amazed.

"I do not understand! you speak in riddles!" he exclaimed. "What has Blake to do with Miss Blanco?"

"Ah, I see, I have let the cat out of the bag without intending to do so," Black John observed with an air of regret.

"I beg that you will explain!" the Cuban exclaimed. "I assure you that I take the deepest interest in Miss Blanco and all that concerns her."

"Well, since I have said so much I suppose I may as well tell the whole story. But you must keep it quiet, for I judge from what I have heard that the lady herself is ignorant of her history."

"Yes, I believe she is; at all events, I have never heard her speak in regard to it."

"The Escobedos had reason for keeping her in ignorance," the Mexican asserted. "She is the daughter of Madame De Belleville's brother, Manuel, who at one time was the captain of the boldest band of brigands that were ever known along the line of the Rio Grande. Her mother was an American girl, a rich heiress, whom Manuel abducted and forced into a marriage. She afterward escaped from him and fled to her friends; but a short time after Catalina was born Manuel again captured the mother and with her the child. Soon afterward the mother sickened and died; but Manuel Escobedo took good care of the child, for his wife's father was a wealthy man, and the child was his only heir; therefore Manuel expected some day, through her, to get hold of his father-in-law's property, but when Catalina was about sixteen years old, her father, Manuel was killed in a fight, and so the scheme came to naught."

"But what has Blake to do with the matter?" Gomes asked.

"Why, he is the man who killed her father, Manuel Escobedo, and destroyed his brigand band, the Red Riders of Rayon."

"Is it possible?" asked Gomes, a gleam of joy appearing on his face.

"No doubt of it! All El Paso on the Rio Grande knows the story."

A few more words and the two parted, but the Mexican had accomplished his purpose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BARGAIN.

THE Mexican was one of the kind of men who did not allow the grass to grow under his feet, as the old saying is, and after having made the disclosure to the Cuban, he took his way to the Red Dragon Mine with the purpose of seeing what arrangement could be made with General Wash Clairborne.

"I think I have given the Cuban something to reflect upon!" he exclaimed, in accents which denoted decided satisfaction as he strode on up the trail.

"He is madly in love with Catalina, and I can plainly see that he fears that Blake is his rival; I must admit that it appears as if such was the case. If it is so, this disclosure will give Gomes a weapon which he will not fail to use, and even if the girl has taken a fancy to the Sport she will hardly be willing to marry him when she discovers that he is the man who killed her father."

And then a sudden thought occurred to the Mexican, and he pondered over it for some time.

"She may doubt the statement," he muttered. "If she has become fascinated by the Sport the chances are a hundred to one that she, with all the willfulness of woman, may refuse to credit the tale, but if she seeks for proof of its truth or falsehood there are plenty of people in El

Paso who can tell her that Manuel Escobedo was killed by this Sport, Blake. She cannot fail to be satisfied on that point, even if Blake denies it, unless she is content to take his word in preference to the host of witnesses who will testify that Manuel Escobedo was slain by his hand."

And then the Mexican fell to meditating upon this point, and the longer he reflected upon the subject the more uncertain he became.

"It is possible that this blow which I have aimed at the Sport will not damage him as much as I thought," he muttered. "If the girl has fallen deeply in love with the fellow, and he stoutly denies that he killed her father, it is not improbable that she would rather trust to his word than to the evidence of a hundred others. It is the nature of womankind. Still the knowledge cannot fail to breed some little trouble even if it does not break off the love affair between them."

This reflection was a comforting one to the schemer, and he meditated upon the matter until he reached the Red Dragon Mine.

He found the two lawyers in the office. The general was extended upon the rude bunk, and Del Santo, puffing away at a cigarette, sat by the table in the center of the room.

"Gentlemen, can I have a few words with you in private?" the Mexican asked, after entering the room and saluting the pair with a formal bow.

"Certainly," responded the general, surveying the new-comer carefully, for he saw that he was a stranger.

"Take a chair," Del Santo remarked. "I judge from your appearance that you are a countryman of mine."

"Yes, señor, I am from the City of Mexico."

"Ah, yes, I have many friends there," Del Santo remarked.

"I have come to see you, gentlemen, in regard to this difficulty in which you have become involved."

This announcement surprised the pair, they exchanged glances, and then looked at the stranger.

"I see you are a little puzzled by my declaration," the Mexican remarked. "Of course it is odd that I, a stranger, should take any interest in the matter, so permit me to explain. My name is Black—John Black; rather a peculiar name, I am aware, for a Mexican, but then in a country like this men bear strange names, and when you come to reverse the order of the two and change it into Black John you will see that it is peculiarly appropriate."

And the two, as they surveyed the speaker, saw how true his words were.

"I will not disguise from you, gentlemen, that I have been unfortunate enough at times to get into trouble with the authorities on account of some very unjust accusations which were brought against me in regard to importing goods into Mexico without taking the trouble to go through the formality of entering them at the custom-house."

The others nodded in token that they understood the situation. Smuggling is a profitable business all along the line of the Mexican frontier, and many a wealthy merchant can thank the smugglers for a deal of his gains.

"I mention this matter to show you that I am a man of the world and one not likely to stand upon trifles; it is the prelude to what I am about to say. I am a man who can be trusted, and I hope, gentlemen, that if this proposal which I am about to make to you is not favorably entertained that the matter will be kept strictly confidential."

From the style of the man the lawyers jumped to the conclusion that he "meant business" and so they did not hesitate to give the required assurance.

"It is in regard to the difficulty in which you gentlemen have become involved with this desperado, Blake," Black John remarked. "I take it for granted that it is extremely annoying for men like yourselves—men of standing—to be defied by this reckless ruffian!"

"That goes without saying," Del Santo replied. "It is disagreeable enough to be baffled and beaten by a man who is your equal, but to be defeated by a low, miserable, gambling desperado is galling in the extreme."

"Yes, there is no mistake about that," the general observed. "Of course, a gentleman ought not to be obliged to lower himself to the level of such a scoundrel, but in a country like this a man is sometimes obliged to do it. I could have avoided this quarrel if I had chosen to put up with the fellow's insolence, but I was not disposed to allow him to interfere in matters which did not concern him."

"Certainly, any man of spirit would not tamely submit to allow a bully of this kind to walk over him," the Mexican remarked. "But a gentleman is placed at a disadvantage when he consents to meet a desperado like this Blake on equal terms. And now, to come to business, I have an acquaintance in the camp who thinks that he is a great chief, to use the term of these miners, and he is anxious to try conclusions with Blake, for he is satisfied that he can make him cry enough."

The lawyers exchanged glances, and then

they both nodded as though to imply that they considered the idea to be a good one.

"What sort of a man is the one of whom you speak?" Clairborne asked.

"He is a bruiser, a professional boxer, and his idea is to challenge Blake to meet him with fists, and he is confident he can give him such a pounding that the man will never be able to hold up his head again in this camp," the Mexican explained.

"Ah, well, if he is a professional boxer he may stand some chance to get the best of the scoundrel," the general remarked. "But unless he understands how to handle himself in a prize fight he would be foolish to undertake to whip Blake. I am not a professional boxer, and do not profess to be an expert in that line, but I have been drawn into a few personal encounters and always succeeded in holding my own until I met this fellow, and I will freely admit that I stood no more chance with him than a hawk would have with an eagle."

"Oh, it is a business, of course—a trade, like any other, and a man who is not a master cannot expect to contend with an expert. My man is an old hand at the bellows and he feels satisfied that he can cut the comb of this now cock of the walk so that he will no longer be able to crow over the town."

"I presume your man is like the generality of mankind. He does not propose to engage in this matter without some inducement is offered to pay him for his trouble," Clairborne observed.

"He is but mortal and must live, of course," the Mexican replied. "If he whips Blake so that he can no longer lord it over the town the service is worth something."

"I will gladly give a hundred dollars out of my own pocket to the man who hammers the rascal soundly!" Del Santo exclaimed.

He had happened to glance in the glass as the Mexican came to the end of his speech, so caught sight of the "elegant pair of black eyes" which the Sport had bestowed upon him, and the sight filled his soul with rage.

"Well, I will give a hundred too," Clairborne said, "and that will make two hundred, but it is understood, of course, that the Sport must be well thrashed."

"Certainly; if the job is not done, and well done, no money will be expected."

"It is a bargain, then, and you can tell your man to go ahead as soon as he pleases. One point I would like to cover," the general added, abruptly. "It would give Del Santo and myself a deal of pleasure to be present when the fight occurs so that we can see this bully soundly whipped."

"That can be easily arranged," the Mexican replied, rising as he spoke. "Certainly you ought to be present when the fight takes place."

"Suppose your man gets whipped?" Clairborne asked.

"Oh, well, some other game can be tried," Black John responded. "If you are willing to pay for revenge I will see that you get it. I have no objection to making an honest penny in this way; all is fish that comes to my net."

"There is money in it for you!" Clairborne declared, "for we mean business, every time!"

"You shall be amply revenged—depend upon it!" was the Mexican's assurance. "Come to the hotel to-morrow night. If Blake puts in an appearance, there will be music in the air."

And then he departed.

CHAPTER IX.

CATALINA'S WARNING.

THE shades of night had descended upon the mining-camp, lights gleamed from the windows and the hardy sons of toil were beginning to flock into the town. Their day's work was done and the night toil of the townsmen was commencing.

It was a beautiful, balmy evening; the air was mild and delightful; Catalina sat by the open window of her apartment, which was on the second floor of the hotel, enjoying the gentle breeze which came laden with balsamic odors from the pines which crowned the foot-hills.

The moon was coming up, a great red ball, round as the raw-hide shield of the mild, feather-garnished chief, and as the girl—sitting a little back from the window, in the shade—she had not lit her candle—gazed out upon the wild, romantic landscape, all its rugged features now softened by the mild light of the queen of night, she thought she had never looked upon a more beautiful scene.

Every now and then as the miners passed underneath the window, scraps of conversation came more or less distinctly to her ears, but she gave little or no heed to the words until a couple of men encountered each other and halted right beneath her window, and the beginning of the conversation immediately attracted her attention.

"Has Blake come to town yet?"

It was the bruiser, Kid Mitchel, who spoke, and he addressed Slippery Smith, who had just come from the hotel.

"No, not yet," Smith replied. "I have been pumping some of the galoots in the saloon and they all allow that Blake didn't generally git hyer until 'bout nine."

"I wish to thunder he would hurry up," Kid

Mitchel growled. "I am jest sp'iling for to git at him—jest a-sp'iling for to hammer the life out of him!"

The mention of Blake's name had immediately attracted Catalina's notice and the words which followed caused her to pay strict attention to the conversation, although to a girl like Catalina the idea of playing the eavesdropper was repugnant, but, under the circumstances, she thought it was her duty to do so, for most surely the old adage that "the end justifies the means," was correct in this case if it ever was.

"Oh, you needn't worry; you will git a chance at him soon enough!" Smith replied.

"Wal, I s'pose I might pass time away by going back to the saloon and h'isting in a few more drinks," the bully remarked.

"Say, Kid, 'tain't any of my biz, I know, but if I was a-going into a game of this kind I would go light on the bug-juice," Slippery Smith continued.

"Oh, bosh!" exclaimed the other in a tone of supreme contempt. "Don't you go for to trouble yer head! I reckon I kin take keer of myself."

"That is all right, in course. 'Tain't for a man like me for to tell a man like you how to get yerself in condition for a job of this kind, but it is my notion that if you git a big lot of liquor on board you won't be able to make a big thing out of this affair, for, 'cording to all accounts, this hyer Blake is a reg'lar hummer, and no mistake!"

"Oh, you mustn't go for to believe all you hear," Kid Mitchel rejoined. "If you do you will get badly left. Thar ain't one man out of a hundred of these miners who have any idea of how to put up their dukes, and if they happen to run across a man who kin handle himself a little, why, they jest jump right to the idea that he is away up to the top of the heap."

"I reckon you have got that ar 'bout right," Slippery Smith admitted. "Still, if I was you, with a job like this hyer one on hand, I wouldn't go to taking no chances. You know you are to git two hundred dollars if you give Blake a good hammering."

This announcement caused the listening girl to pay increased attention so as not to miss a word of the conversation.

"Wal, I reckon I know it, and you kin jest bet high that I wouldn't have taken the job if I didn't stand a chance to make a good stake out of it!" Kid Mitchel declared.

"Well, if I was a going to do the trick I wouldn't go to h'isting no more benzine, 'cos if you don't fix the job up brown you won't get no ducats."

"Don't you fret! I am one of the kind of pugs wot kin fight a better battle right off my beer than the most of men kin with three months training."

"Mebbe so," responded the other, in a tone which plainly showed that he had considerable doubt in regard to the truth of this. "But I kin jest tell you that if I was you I would go in for to make a sure thing outen it. These hyer nobs won't pay the two hundred dollars unless you give Blake the biggest kind of a hammering."

"It is all right, I tell you!" the bruiser exclaimed, evidently annoyed by the importunities of the other. "I will do the job up in fine shape, and take the money of these sports away from them so durned quick that it will make their heads swim! But I am going to have my drinks, all the same, though. Come along to Dutchy's shebang and have a bowl, and don't you worry 'bout my getting full, for a few swallows of bug-juice ain't going to upset me."

Slippery Smith saw that it would be of no use to attempt to control the business and so gave it up as a bad job.

The two men went on their way, heading toward the Mule Pass Saloon, and the girl was left to meditate upon what she had heard.

"Is it not dreadful?" she exclaimed, communing with herself. "This ruffian has been hired to attack Mr. Blake, and he will come to the camp unsuspecting of danger."

"He must be warned!" she exclaimed, abruptly, after brooding over the matter for a few moments. "I cannot allow him to walk into this trap! He has served me and now comes the chance for me to return the favor, and I will do it, too, oh! so gladly!"

Catalina sprang to her feet, and her active mind soon conceived a plan by means of which she would be able to warn Blake of the danger which awaited him without any one being aware that she had had a hand in the matter.

There were quite a number of Mexican women in the town, for the Marquis De Belleville had brought Mexican miners with him, when he had commenced operations on the Red Dragon property.

In the hotel a Mexican girl was employed to assist the landlord's wife, and it was a common thing for her to run out at night, after her work was done, to visit some of her friends, closely wrapped in a long, dark cloak, with a scarf muffled around her head after the fashion of the daughters of her race.

Catalina possessed a cloak and scarf, much like the one the girl wore, and as she was about the same size as the Mexican maid, any one who chanced to see her leave the hotel, or en-

countered her on the street, would not be apt to suspect she was not the hotel girl.

Catalina hurriedly assumed her disguise, and then descended to the street.

She did not encounter any one in the house, and as she proceeded along the street, no one paid any attention to her.

It was about eight o'clock when she left the hotel, and as she had gathered from the conversation of the men that Blake did not usually get to the camp until nine, she felt certain of meeting him.

She went up the road until she came to the point where the Chinaman's trail, as it was commonly termed, began.

Into this she turned, and, within five minutes after so doing, encountered Blake and Ringwood on their way to the camp.

The moment Catalina perceived the two men she halted.

The spot was a favorable one for an interview, being a broad open space, with no obstacles behind which a listener could find concealment.

The pards noticed that the girl had halted, and, naturally, came to the conclusion that she intended to speak to them, a fact which surprised them, but they were still more surprised when they discovered that the cloaked and veiled figure was Catalina.

The girl understood that Ringwood was in Blake's confidence, and so she did not hesitate to speak before him.

It was rather awkward for the girl to admit that she had played the eavesdropper, but as she explained, it was purely by accident, and for a good purpose.

"I don't believe the recording angel will make a very black mark against you on account of it," Blake remarked. "And I am sure that I, personally, am extremely obliged to you for the trouble which you have taken. This warning will enable me to be on my guard, and I do not doubt I shall be able to upset this little scheme to damage me."

"I am very glad at being able to have a chance to serve you!" Catalina declared, with an earnestness which plainly showed that the speech came straight from her heart.

"Two hundred dollars is a pretty good price to pay for a little luxury of this kind," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, it is quite a sum to give for a little satisfaction, but I presume the men who have arranged the affair are able to afford it," the Sport replied.

"The two lawyers, eh?" Ringwood suggested. "Yes, there is not much doubt that they are the ones who will pay the two hundred, and I will have to take occasion to square this little account some time."

Then again he thanked Catalina for the warning and the three proceeded to the camp, the girl a few hundred yards in advance, for if she had gone through the town in company with the pair, a deal of gossip would have been excited.

She entered the hotel by the rear door, while the pards proceeded to the saloon.

CHAPTER XX. IN THE SALOON.

OF course Catalina did not know the men whose conversation she had overheard, nor was she able to give any description of them, owing to the fact that she had not seen either of the two, and then neither one had called the other by name; all she could say was that she judged by their voices that they were coarse, common men.

On the way to the hotel the pards had discussed the matter.

"I think this is rather unhandsome treatment on the part of the lawyers," Blake observed, "particularly as far as General Clairborne is concerned, but it is possible he is not aware of the fact that he owes his life to my mercy, and that it would have been just as easy for me to have put the ball through his brain as simply to disable him in the way I did."

"He is one of those Southern fire-eaters, proud as a peacock and as arrogant as blazes," Dave Ringwood declared. "And it is quite possible, you know, for him to think that his wound was an accidental one, and that it was only by chance you succeeded in getting the best of the fight."

"Oh, yes, that seems to me very probable. Men of his stamp are usually extremely self-conceited, and it sometimes takes a lot of hard knocks to make them understand that they cannot have everything their own way in this world."

"I wonder who the party is that has taken the job of hammering you?" Ringwood remarked, reflectively.

"I have not the slightest idea, but I fancy it is some stranger, for I don't believe it would be an easy matter to get any of the old crowd who know what I can do in the boxing line, to tackle such a job."

"I reckon you are right about that; the way in which you warmed Howling Mike and Bristol Bill was a caution to the rest."

"There has been a good many pilgrims come to the camp during the last month, for the place

has enjoyed quite a boom, and it is probably some one of these strangers who has gone into this speculation, thinking that it will be an easy way to pick up two hundred dollars."

"The man who tries it on may change his mind in regard to that before he is through with the job," Ringwood observed, dryly.

"Yes, unless he is away at the top of the heap in the boxing line, and it is not probable that any champion pugilist has found his way to this remote camp," Blake remarked. "I reckon it will turn out to be the same old story—some fellow who thinks he is a fighter because he never happened to run across any man who knew any more about it than he did, is anxious to show the town that he is a chief and collar a good, big stake at the same time."

"From what Miss Blanco repeated of the conversation between the two, it seems to me that it would be a safe thing to bet that this would-be chief will have so much liquor on board by the time you get to town that even if he is an extra good man he will not be in a condition to show what he can do."

"Yes; a man who fights with John Barleycorn is seldom in a condition to fight anybody else."

It will be seen from this conversation that neither of the two had any fears in regard to the result of the attack.

The hands of the clock in the saloon pointed at fifteen minutes to nine when the pards entered.

The saloon was well filled with people, gathered in little groups, exchanging the talk of the day.

The pards nodded to their acquaintances, and both were on the alert to discover the champion, whom they supposed to be present.

They had an idea that they would be able to identify him, even before he made any hostile move.

Carelessly they glanced around, but none of the strangers in the saloon seemed to be paying any attention to them.

"I reckon the man is not to the fore," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"I reckon not, for I don't see anybody look at us in a suspicious way," the Fresh replied.

Just then old Ben Prince, who was in the back part of the saloon, caught sight of the pards and came forward to greet them.

"How ar' ye?" he exclaimed, as he shook hands with the pards in the vigorous manner common to him. "Have ye heard that some galoots have struck it rich up in the Mule Pass Mountains?"

The pards had not heard the news, and the old miner proceeded to relate the particulars.

Just as he came to the end of his recital the door of the saloon opened, and in came Kid Mitchel and Slippery Smith.

The pards were only about ten feet from the door, their eyes upon the portal as the pair entered, and from the peculiar way in which the new-comers looked at them, the two sports immediately jumped to the conclusion that these were the men whose conversation Catalina had overheard.

The two slouched up to the bar, near which the pards and the old miner were standing, and Kid Mitchel called for a drink for himself and pard.

"Jest sling it out lively, too, you tumbler-juggler, for I want you to understand that I am as good a man as thar is in this bull durned town, bar none!" the bully declared, and as he uttered the speech he glared at the Fresh in such an insolent way that the attention of all who happened to notice it was immediately attracted.

"Hello! it kinder seems as if that cuss was a-meaning that for somebody," Old Ben Prince observed in an undertone to the Fresh.

"Yes, it does, and I reckon that if he has come here for a fight he will get one before long," the Sport replied.

It was evident from Kid Mitchel's appearance that he had been drinking freely and, despite his boasts in regard to how much liquor he could stand, the potent fluid had decidedly affected him.

By the time that the ruffian had finished the sentence all eyes were fixed upon him.

Kid Mitchel noticed this, and at once began to swell with importance.

"I am as big a chief as thar is in this hyer camp!" he declared. "I am the champion, and don't you forget it! I have heerd considerable talk 'bout a galoot that thinks he is mighty handy with his fists, and I am jest hungry to get a crack at him so as to show the cuss that wot he reckons he knows 'bout fighting don't amount to nothing at all!" And then the fellow bestowed another insolent, defiant look upon Blake.

By this time there were few in the room who had not come to the conclusion that Kid Mitchel intended to provoke Blake into a quarrel, and the old-timers, who were posted in regard to the Fresh's abilities in the fisticuff line, and remembered how easily he had polished off two such warriors as Howling Mike and Bristol Bill, anticipated that there was fun ahead.

"I am jest a-looking for this hyer Sport who thinks he kin run the town!" Kid Mitchel con-

tinued, after swallowing his liquor at a single gulp. "I want to jest show him that he don't stand no more chance for the championship when I am around than a ten-year old kid. I am the man wot is the cock of the walk, and if thar is a galoot in the town who thinks he is a fighter, now's the time for him to come forward so I kin git a chance to whale blazes out of him."

At this point the landlord thought that it was about time for him to interfere. He was a prudent man, and was anxious there should not be any trouble in his house for fear that damage might be done.

"It is all right, my dear Mr. Mitchel," Perkins said, in his smoothest way. "No one disputes that you are one of the best men in the camp—"

"I ain't one of the best—I am *the* best!" the bully declared, loudly, interrupting the landlord without any ceremony.

"One of the best blowers!" exclaimed the Fresh. "In fact, the champion gas-bag!"

This unexpected announcement made the miners laugh, and the titter which arose on the air was galling in the extreme to the boaster.

"Wot do you mean by that?" Kid Mitchel demanded, glaring at the Sport with angry eyes.

"Just exactly what I said," the Fresh responded. "You are a champion, undoubtedly, as far as bragging and boasting goes, but I don't remember to have ever heard that you have ever damaged anybody since you came to this camp. You have got away with considerable bad whisky, no doubt, but that is about all you have done since you struck the town."

Now that the Fresh knew who the man was that had taken the job of defeating him, he did not wonder that he had gone into the speculation.

He knew Kid Mitchel well enough by reputation, although he had never happened to come in contact with the man.

The class of which the bruiser was a type was a familiar one to him. The broken-down boxer, who once had the reputation of being a good man, but had allowed liquor to get the best of him, so that he was but a wreck of what he once was, the Sport had often met, and although Kid Mitchel was not an old man by any means, under forty, yet the life of dissipation which he had led for years had weakened the great strength which he once possessed, impaired the elasticity of his limbs, and made him but a shadow of what he once was; he was not conscious of this fact though, but believed that he was as good as he ever was.

"You are talking mighty loud, but I reckon you don't care to try a go with me!" Kid Mitchel cried with a malignant smile.

"Oh, yes, I had just as lief take the conceit out of you as out of any man that I know of in the camp."

"There's a bright moon so there'll be plenty of light for you gentlemen to settle the thing in the street!" the landlord declared, extremely anxious to get them out of the house.

"Come on if you want to be hammered!" cried Kid Mitchel, starting for the door.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RARE SHOW.

OUT into the street went the bruiser; Slippery Smith was at his heels, then came the pards and Old Ben Prince, and then the rest of the inmates of the saloon; none held back, except the employees whose duties would not allow them to leave, and they hastened to the windows so as to have a view of the contest.

Slippery Smith was decidedly ill at ease. He had been promised by his companion that he should have twenty dollars out of the two hundred, and so had done his best to keep the Kid from drinking, because, although Mitchel declared that the liquor did not have any effect upon him, yet Smith could see that it was not the truth, and that the bruiser was decidedly the worse for the whisky.

When he arrived in the middle of the street Kid Mitchel turned and faced the Sport.

"It is understood that this is to be a fair fist fight and that no weapons are to be used," the bruiser said.

"Yes that is understood, no weapons," Blake replied.

"I'm a reg'lar pug, I am! I have fought more battles in the prize ring than I have fingers and toes, and the man who is able to stand up ag'in' me at all, must be an extra good one," Kid Mitchel declared, arrogantly.

"Oh, stop your boasting!" the Fresh exclaimed, impatiently. "Don't tell us how good a man you are, but go in and show your skill. You may think you have got a soft thing and that you will be able to collar that little two hundred dollars without any trouble, but it is my belief that you will discover you have made a mistake before this picnic is over."

This was all Greek to the crowd, of course, and they stared at each other as much as to ask what it meant.

Kid Mitchel and Slippery Smith were taken

completely by surprise and for a moment they looked at the Sport, open-mouthed with wonder, then, conscious that their faces were betraying them they hastened to assume an ignorant look.

"I reckon I don't ketch on to w'ot you are driving at, pard," Kid Mitchel remarked.

"Yes, you do, you know what I mean well enough," the Fresh retorted. "And you are not working the trick as well as you thought you could. I suppose it looked like a mighty easy way to make a good, big stake, but I reckon you will find it is one of the biggest mistakes you ever made."

The pair knew not what to make of this disclosure, for it showed that the Sport was aware of the bargain which had been made.

And the dark-browed Mexican, Black John, who was among the spectators, was as much astonished as the ruffians.

His active mind though was quick to guess a solution to the riddle.

"The lawyers have been foolish enough to tell some one about this matter, and so it has come to the ears of the Sport!" the Mexican muttered. "I am amazed that they should be so imprudent. I wonder if they mentioned my name in connection with the affair?" And a dark frown gathered on his swarthy face as he reflected upon the subject. "If they have it will be almost certain to put me in a hole, for this dare-devil Sport is just the man to hunt me up and call me to an account for my share in the trouble."

"Well, I shall have to lie out of it and put all the blame on this bruiser; I but acted as a go-between."

This conclusion satisfied his mind but the frown still lingered upon his face as he surveyed the gladiators.

Kid Mitchel prepared for the fight by removing his weapons from his belt, then he tightened the leather band around his waist, removed his old hat, which with the weapons, he gave to Slippery Smith, and then rolled up the sleeves of his faded and discolored flannel shirt.

The Fresh followed his example, Dave Ringwood acting as his esquire.

The Mexican watched the men closely as they prepared for the contest, and he was disappointed when the arms of the men were exposed to view.

The pair were about of a size, apparently, the Fresh a little the bigger man, but when the shirt-sleeves were rolled up, it was plain that Blake was far more powerfully built than his opponent.

"What arms!" the Mexican muttered, as he surveyed them. "They look strong enough to strangle an ox. And that dull-witted brute has been drinking, too—muddling his brain with liquor before engaging in a contest which will tax all his powers. 'The clumsy scoundrel!'" And the tone in which Black John spoke, plainly showed how disgusted he was with the bruiser. "It will serve him right to be beaten within an inch of his life. Why could he not have left the liquor alone when about to engage in a fight of this kind? The dull-witted fool! I hope the Sport will half kill him."

"Now, then, are you ready to take your gruel?" Kid Mitchel exclaimed, with a boastful air, after his preparations for the fight were completed.

"Yes, I am ready to take a lesson, or give one," the Fresh replied, significantly, stepping forward as he spoke and confronting the bruiser.

"I reckon we need a referee to run this byer biz," Kid Mitchel observed. "For I am in for a reg'lar ring fight, you know, no rough and tumble, but a squar' thing, 'cording to London rules."

"That suits me," Blake remarked. "Any way you like, I am agreeable. And now, fellow-citizens, who will volunteer to referee this fight?"

"Johnny Burke!" exclaimed one of the miners, and a dozen others immediately took up the cry, showing that the owner of the name was a popular man.

Burke was a partner of Major Pete Houston in the State of Texas saloon, a veteran sporting man, who bore the reputation of being one of the squarest fellows in the town.

A better man for the position could not have been found in Arizona.

He was standing in the front row of the spectators, in plain sight of all, and immediately became the center of observation as soon as his name was spoken.

"Will you favor us, Mr. Burke?" Blake asked.

"Well, I am willing, if it is agreeable to all parties," the veteran sporting man replied, stepping forward as he spoke.

"You're the man for the money!" cried one of the bystanders, and then came a general chorus of assent.

"I am satisfied," Kid Mitchel remarked. "All I want is a fair show, and I reckon that Johnny Burke is man enough to give me that."

"You can bet your bottom dollar that you will get a square deal from me!" the saloon-keeper asserted. "And I reckon I know the ropes, too, for it isn't the first time that I have held the position. Now, if you are ready, gentlemen, I will call time."

"All ready," Blake responded.

"If you only knew what a warming you are going to git, you wouldn't be so lively 'bout coming up to the scratch!" the bully declared.

"Oh, will you quit your chin-music and come right down to business?" the Fresh said with a disgusted air. "You are not going to win this fight by blowing about it, and instead of wasting your breath you had better save it, for you would be safe in betting a big stake that you will need it all before you get through."

"I'll fetch you to a stand-still inside of five minutes!" Kid Mitchel boasted.

"Time!" exclaimed Johnny Burke.

The antagonists advanced, and Kid Mitchel extended his hand.

"Oh no, none of that!" the Fresh exclaimed, contemptuously. "I do not care to shake hands with a man of your stamp. You have gone into this thing solely for money. You are to get two hundred dollars if you succeed in whipping me, and you are no better than a hired assassin!"

The face of the bruiser grew dark with rage at being thus publicly accused; he hesitated for a moment before replying, and then, in a voice hoarse with passion, cried:

"Jest you mind your eye, for I am going to warm you as no man was ever warmed in Arizona afore!"

"If you are able!" the Sport retorted. "If you are able; don't forget to put that in, for if you have bitten off more than you can chew, you will not do the trick, no matter how much you may want to."

"Time!" again cried Johnny Burke.

"Go it, ye cripples!" cried one of the bystanders, anxious for the Sport to commence.

That Kid Mitchel was no novice at this sort of thing was apparent from the way he carried himself; but even if he had been in his prime, instead of being old and "stale," to use the sporting term which signified that a man has lost his power of endurance, and was all right, instead of being under the influence of liquor, he would not have been a match for the Fresh, who, in a bout of this kind, was fit to stand before a champion of champions.

The pair sparred for a few moments, the Fresh as light and active on his feet as a cat, his opponent clumsy and heavy, and then Kid Mitchel, not being able to get an "opening," made a desperate rush at Blake, intending to force the fighting, but the Fresh gave ground before the attack, and nimbly evaded it.

Only a few blows were exchanged, and none of them did any damage.

Already the bruiser was beginning to feel the effects of his exertions.

"You are dancing round like a jumping-jack!" he exclaimed, angrily. "Why don't you come up to the scratch—stand your ground like a man?"

Hardly had the words left his lips when the Fresh made a ferocious attack on him.

Taken by surprise, he gave ground. Blake clinched with him, there was a short struggle, then he was "back-heeled" by the Fresh and sent to the ground with a shock which, for the moment, knocked the breath out of him.

The spectators roared with delight.

This was a rare show indeed.

Slippery Smith hastened to assist the bruiser to rise, while the referee took out his watch to mark the flight of time.

The Fresh, seemingly none the worse for the bout, leaned on Ringwood's shoulder.

"How is he—pretty good man, eh?" Dave Ringwood asked.

"Well, he has been, but he is stale and fat now," the Fresh answered. "It is my game to tire him out, and after his wind is gone, he will not stand much chance."

The call of "time" came altogether too soon to suit Kid Mitchel, who had "bellows to mend" as he advanced to meet his opponent.

Blake immediately commenced operations by "rushing" his antagonist. For a few minutes the bruiser held his own very well, although the blows which reached home were not heavy enough to do material damage; then there was another clinch, and Kid Mitchel, anticipating that his opponent intended to "back-heel" him as before, put forth all his powers to prevent it, but after a violent struggle, Blake broke away and, taking advantage of the bruiser's exhaustion, got in a terrific right-hander just under the heart which made Mitchel wince with pain.

Roused to anger by this liberty, the bruiser made a desperate rush at Blake, and this time the Sport did not yield an inch of ground, but met his opponent as he rushed in with a straight right-hander which, landing between the eyes, dazed the bruiser for a moment and brought him to a sudden halt.

Taking advantage of this, Blake got home his terrible left on the chest again, and as Kid Mitchel fell back, forced by the blow, the Fresh availed himself of the opportunity and swung his right in, aiming for the "point of the jaw," the vulnerable spot for a knock-out blow.

The attempt was a success; over went Kid Mitchel, "put to sleep" in the most scientific manner.

The crowd roared with delight as the man fell, and the majority of them agreed that it was as pretty a blow as had ever been struck in the Territory.

Slippery Smith ran to his principal's assistance.

Kid Mitchel lay helpless on the ground, insensible from the blow.

"Gosh! I reckon the cuss is killed!" Slippery Smith exclaimed in dismay.

"Oh, no, a little tap like that wouldn't kill anybody," Johnny Burke observed. "He will be all right again in a few minutes, but I am betting that he will not be in a condition to renew the fight when time is called."

CHAPTER XXII.

STILL ON THE SCENT.

THE veteran sport was right; Kid Mitchel was not able to come to time, for it was fully eight minutes before he recovered consciousness, although Slippery Smith did all he could for him, and one of the bystanders, anxious for the man to recover, so there would be some more fun, volunteered the loan of a flask of whisky.

After the bruiser's senses returned Slippery Smith assisted him to his feet, much to the satisfaction of the majority of the bystanders, who were impatient for the sport to proceed, but men who were a judge of this sort of thing, like the veteran sport, for instance, did not anticipate that the fight would go on; Kid Mitchel had gone "all to pieces," and would be only a plaything for the other if he attempted to face him now.

"How do you feel?" Slippery Smith asked, anxiously, after he got Kid Mitchel upon his feet.

"I feel like blazes," the other growled in hoarse accents hardly able to speak from exhaustion.

"You have been knocked out, Mitchel," Johnny Burke remarked. "Nearly ten minutes have elapsed now since the time you were put to sleep."

"Yes, I am a whipped man, and it ain't no use for me to deny it," the bruiser replied.

"Well, as far as that goes I am willing to waive the knock-out and go on with the fight if you are not satisfied," the Fresh remarked.

"I am much obliged to you, all the same, but I reckon I have got all I want," Kid Mitchel replied. "You have done me up in a good squar' fight and I would be a fool to try it on ag'in with you. I am satisfied if you are."

"Oh, yes; I am not going around picking quarrels with anybody, but if I am attacked I reckon I am able to defend myself," the Fresh remarked. "And by the way just give my compliments to the men who put up the two hundred dollars and tell them that it will cost more money than that to get the best of me."

To this speech Kid Mitchel made no reply but turned sullenly away.

Blake donned his coat again, buckled on his weapons and returned to the saloon in company with Dave Ringwood, the great part of the crowd following him, but a few remained to console with the bruiser over his defeat.

But Kid Mitchel was in too bad a humor to converse with anybody; he gruffly repelled all attempts to get him to talk, and, as soon as he got his weapons on, took his departure in company with Slippery Smith.

"He ain't anything anyway but a durned hog and I'm right glad he got licked!" cried one of the miners, voicing the opinion of the rest.

Black John and the Cuban, Gomes, who had been among the spectators, came together as the remainder of the crowd moved toward the saloon.

"This Sport is seemingly invincible," the Mexican remarked.

"Yes, but the pitcher that goes often to the well will be broken at last," the Cuban replied grimly.

"Oh, there is no doubt about that; the Sport will meet his master some day, but I fancy that when he does it will be a different kind of man from this ruffian."

"No doubt; he is nothing but a dull brute, but little better than an animal," the Cuban remarked. "He was an idiot to attempt to face a man like Blake with his senses muddled by liquor; any one could see that he was half-drunk."

"Yes, he had been drinking heavily, that was plain."

"What do you suppose Blake meant when he spoke of the two hundred dollars?" Gomes asked.

"Do you think it possible that this fellow was offered such a sum to whip Blake?" and the Cuban fixed his dark eyes searchingly on the face of the other as he spoke, as though he had a suspicion that the Mexican had had a hand in the matter.

Black John bore the scrutiny without flinching.

"Oh, no, I take no stock in such a thing. Two hundred dollars is a large sum of money to pay for such a service, and though, being a stranger in the camp, I am not well-posted in regard to what foes this man Blake may have, yet it does not seem probable to me that any one would make such an arrangement."

"True, it does not seem probable," Gomes asserted, and then the two parted.

Gomes went up the street toward the Red Dragon Mine, while the Mexican walked toward

the hotel as though he intended to enter it, but he paused at the portal until the Cuban was well on his way, and then he hurried after the defeated bruiser.

A few hundred yards down the street Kid Mitchel and Slippery Smith had halted in expectation of the Mexican's coming.

"They had chosen a dark spot, but the keen eyes of Black John quickly distinguished them."

"Well, the attempt was a failure," the Mexican remarked.

"Yes, the galoot was a durned sight better man than I thought he was," the bruiser admitted.

"The two hundred will not be gained, but I think I can get twenty-five, for you ought to have something for your trouble."

"I wouldn't go through it again for no twenty-five!" Kid Mitchel growled.

"It is poor pay, and you must have your revenge. Since you cannot beat this Sport by fair means are you not willing to try foul?" the Mexican asked.

"I will do anything to get square with him!" the bruiser declared, savagely.

"If we manage the matter rightly, I think we can pull some money out of the affair," Black John remarked. "Wait for me in the Mule Pass Saloon. I will see you there in an hour or two."

"All right, we will be thar," Kid Mitchel responded and then the two separated, Kid Mitchel and Slippery Smith going to the saloon while the Mexican took the road leading to the Red Dragon Mine.

And as Black John went on his way he put his reflections into words.

"When the Cuban parted from me he went directly to the mine; the chances are great that he will call upon the lawyers and relate to them the story of the fight, so they will be aware that the scheme has miscarried before they see me. Now, the question is, will they be willing to go any further in the matter? Will they be so eager for revenge that they will be glad of an opportunity to strike at the life of Blake? If they are men with blood in their veins they will not hesitate, although, as a rule, these lawyers are a cautious set."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PROPOSAL.

WHEN the Mexican arrived at the mine he did not enter the works, but concealed himself so that he could command a view of the office door.

It was his idea that the Cuban was in the office, and he did not wish Gomes to know that he was acquainted with the lawyers.

As he anticipated, Gomes was in the office, for in ten minutes' time he came out and proceeded to his own quarters.

The Mexican waited until he was safely in the house, and then he proceeded to the door of the office and knocked.

Del Santo came to the portal, and recognizing the Mexican, admitted him.

As soon as he was inside he saw from the expression upon the faces of the lawyers that they were extremely dissatisfied with the way matters had gone.

"Luck was against us, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, as he helped himself to a chair.

"The affair has been badly managed!" the general exclaimed.

"Oh, no; our man did all that he could," the Mexican answered. "He would have made a better showing, perhaps, if he had not drank so much liquor before going into the fight; but, after all, it could not have made any difference. He was no match for Blake, drunk or sober, and was foolish to undertake the job."

"From the description we have received of the fight there is no doubt that your statement is correct," Clairborne remarked. "But how comes it that your man was stupid enough to betray that he was to receive two hundred dollars for the job? The news was carried directly to the Sport, and he must be dull indeed not to guess that we were the men who made the offer."

"Upon my word, you astonish me!" the Mexican cried. "That the Sport knows about the two hundred dollars there is no doubt, for he spoke of the matter before the fight took place, but the information did not come from me or the two fellows who were in the plot, for both of them are old hands at such a game and know enough not to betray such a secret. When Blake spoke it was my thought that one of you gentlemen had incautiously spoken of the matter to some one whom you thought you could trust, and so the news had leaked out."

"No, no!" cried both the loungers in a breath.

"Neither Del Santo nor myself spoke of the matter to a living soul!" Clairborne declared. "We would not give such a thing away. We know too much to do it."

"How, then, in the name of all that is wonderful, did the Sport get the news?" the Mexican exclaimed.

The lawyers shook their heads.

"It is an ugly bit of business," the general declared. "The Sport will suspect that we are the

men who set this fellow on, and he will be after us, the first thing we know."

"Would it not be wise, then, to take measures to silence him for good and all?" Black John asked, bluntly.

Clairborne and Del Santo exchanged glances, for it struck them that this was extremely plain speaking.

"Oh, do not hesitate to speak out, gentlemen, I can be trusted!" the Mexican declared, perceiving that the lawyers hesitated.

"I have become interested in this business, and I might as well go on as to stop. I am not afraid of the risk, for I will undertake to manage the matter so that no hint of it will get to the Sport this time."

"My dear sir, you are talking right out in meeting, so to speak," the general remarked. "And you must be aware that what you are proposing is rather risky."

"Yes, to a certain extent," Black John answered, with a careless air. "Of course, personally, I take no interest in the matter. I have no grudge against this man, Blake. He is a stranger to me, but I have interested myself in this affair, because I thought there was a chance for me to make a few dollars out of it. I will frankly admit to you, gentlemen, that I have done business in this line in Mexico, and I think I know how to handle it. This Sport is dangerous—more so now than he was before this affair happened. There is little doubt that he thinks you are at the bottom of this attack which has been made upon him, and, unless I am greatly mistaken in the man, he will not rest satisfied until he has secured revenge."

"All that you say may be true. I will not dispute it," the general remarked, sternly. "But I don't think that either Del Santo or myself desire to make any bargain for the assassination of Blake."

The Mexican laughed outright.

"Ah, I see you do not understand how the affair can be arranged!" he exclaimed. "There is no bargain in the matter—no arrangement for the killing of Blake. All you have to do is to back your opinion with your money. Blake is a sport—a man apt to quarrel, and quick to fight. I do not think such a man will make old bones. You do? Good! You back your opinion by a bet. You bet me—say, five hundred dollars, that Blake will not die in a year, for you have confidence that he is so skillful and lucky that no foes can overcome him. I hold to the contrary belief. Skillful and lucky as he is, there will come a time when his luck will desert him, and his skill fail. You can see for yourself that the wager is a fair one, and even if it were known, it would not appear as if you were an enemy of the Sport. On the contrary, you are his friend, for you are willing to risk your money upon him."

For a few moments there was silence; the two lawyers reflected earnestly upon the matter.

Del Santo was the first to speak.

"I do not see as there is anything out of the way in making a bet of this kind," he said.

"The peculiar nature of the dark scheme appealed powerfully to him, for it was just such a one as he would have concocted under like circumstances."

"But the affair must be kept strictly secret," Clairborne remarked.

"Certainly!" the Mexican declared. "I will take care that it does not leak out this time, for I will not reveal to a single soul that we have come to an arrangement."

"It would not be prudent," Del Santo observed.

"Decidedly not!" the general coincided. "If you try any little game, which you think will help you to win the bet, you will, probably, be obliged to use confederates, and you can rest assured that if you allow them to know there is a good-sized stake depending upon their efforts, some one of them will be sure to betray you."

"Have no fear; I will keep the matter sacredly to myself," the Mexican protested.

"In a matter of this kind we cannot very well reduce it to writing," the general remarked. "But I give my word of honor that if you win the bet, you will get the ducats all right."

"That is sufficient. I am quite content with the guarantee. Do not be impatient, you know, for in order to carry a matter of this kind to a successful termination, one must not be in a hurry," and then the Mexican departed.

"That fellow will be apt to do the trick, I think," Clairborne observed.

"Yes, he has the instinct of the bloodhound," Del Santo asserted. "He thinks there is money in the affair, and he is going to get it if he can."

With this remark the subject was dismissed.

On the next morning the pair were astonished, though, by receiving a call from the Fresh.

With his usual frankness Blake proceeded immediately to business.

"I suppose you heard that I had a little row with a fellow named Kid Mitchel in the camp last night?"

The general admitted that this was so, with the idea that trouble was coming.

"Now, I am a plain, straightforward kind of a fellow, and I believe in hitting the nail on the head, every time," the Sport announced. "Did you hire this Kid Mitchel to attack me?"

The look of amazement which appeared on the faces of the lawyers was a sight.

"What on earth put such an idea in your head?" the general cried.

"It is too absurd!" Del Santo declared.

"Maybe so, and yet there is no doubt that this bruiser was to get two hundred dollars if he succeeded in climbing me!" the Fresh replied.

"It is not possible that the man dared to assert that I made him any such offer?" Clairborne.

"No, he did not say that you were to give it, but he did assert that he was to get the sum from somebody. A friend of mine overheard a conversation between this bruiser and his pard, and as they spoke with the utmost freedom, not having any idea that their words were noted, there is no doubt that truth was spoken."

"But why, under the circumstances, do you jump to the conclusion that I am responsible for the offer?" Clairborne asked, still assuming to be greatly astonished.

"Because I don't think there is any other man in the camp but you who would be willing to go two hundred dollars on such a thing."

"No doubt there are plenty of other men in the town upon whose toes you have trodden," the general remarked.

"Oh, yes, I have my enemies, of course, but there is not a man of them who would be likely to put up a stake like that," Blake replied. "I thought I would come and see you about the matter, for if you want war, I should like to know, so as to be prepared."

"Mr. Blake I do not want war; I am quite satisfied!" Clairborne declared. "And I can assure you I shall not undertake to injure you by any underhand means."

"Well, I am glad of it; I wanted to know how the thing was, that is all," and then the Sport departed.

"We have pulled the wool over his eyes!" the general chuckled.

"Those fellows are a couple of snakes and I must keep my eyes open or I will get bit!" the Fresh remarked as he proceeded on his homeward way.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A REVELATION.

TIME and tide wait for no man, and rapidly the days slipped away without anything occurring to any of the characters of our tale worth detailing.

A week passed; during that time General Clairborne's wound had healed so rapidly that before it was over it gave him but little inconvenience and he was able to go around town attending to business as usual.

He encountered Blake, of course, and always greeted him in the most polite and ceremonious manner, and in speaking about the Fresh the general took pains to declare that he bore no malice on account of his quarrel with the Sport.

"It was a misunderstanding which ought not to have occurred," he remarked. "I was in the wrong to quarrel with him, and regret very much that any trouble occurred, but it is all right now. Blake is a fine fellow and I certainly would much rather prefer to look upon him as a friend than as an enemy."

These remarks were repeated to the Fresh as a matter of course, and that gentleman professed to be extremely glad that the lawyer was not laying up anything against him, but when Blake was alone with Dave Ringwood he put his tongue in his cheek in a peculiar manner and observed:

"Soft words butter no parsnips," the general is playing possum; he thinks to throw me off my guard, but when he does, then he may hope to catch a weasel asleep."

So it will be perceived that the Sport did not place any reliance upon the words of the lawyer, and he went about taking as much care to avoid being caught at a disadvantage as though he believed the camp of Slide-Out to be swarming with foes eager for his blood.

Dave Ringwood always accompanied him, and two such men, always on their guard—always ready for an attack, it was no easy matter to surprise.

The Mexican, Black John, soon came to this opinion, for it was not long before he made the discovery that the Sport was on his guard.

"Well, there is no hurry," he remarked, with the air of a philosopher. "What cannot be done this week may be done next week, and if not then, a month later. Everything comes to him who waits."

It will be seen from this that the Mexican was a patient man.

During this week Black John had shown himself to be quite a sport.

He had said he was a speculator, and was looking for a good mine in which to invest, but after a few of the "knights of the green cloth," heroes of the pasteboards and dice, had tested his skill, it became the opinion of those who knew anything about the matter that the Mexican was a far better card-sharp than miner,

and that he would not be apt to invest in any mining property as long as he could find men fools enough to gamble with him.

During this time the Cuban, Gomes, had been pondering over the disclosure which had been made to him by the Mexican.

At one moment he exulted in the thought that when Catalina came to know the facts in the case it would effectually destroy any love which might exist in her heart for the daring Sport, and then the next he was tormented by doubts as to whether it really would have that effect or not.

Sanches noticed Gomes's gloomy air and questioned him in regard to it.

The Cuban, in a moment of confidence, revealed to the other the thoughts which weighed so heavily upon his mind.

Sanches listened attentively to the tale, pondered over the matter for a few minutes, then remarked:

"I think the Mexican is wrong in his surmise that if there is a love affair between Blake and the Catalina, the disclosure of the fact that the Sport was the man who killed her father will put an end to it."

"But that should be the natural result!" Gomes argued.

"Yes, the natural result under the usual circumstances, but in this case you must take into consideration the fact that if the story this Mexican tells is true, the girl has never known much of her father, and so it is not possible that she can feel for him the strong natural love which a child should have for a parent. Her father has been like a stranger to her."

"Yes, that is true," Gomes remarked, thoughtfully. "Still, the man was her father, and it seems to me that it would be repugnant to her to love the slayer of her parent."

"Of all the uncertain things in this world women are the most uncertain," the other observed with the air of a sage. "A fellow cannot calculate upon what they will do under certain circumstances as you can in regard to a man."

"What would you advise as the case is?" Gomes asked, his brow gloomy with thought.

"Put the girl to the test as soon as possible. Reveal the secret to her, but be careful to pledge her to secrecy before you speak, for if she should chance to speak to Blake in regard to the matter—and she is just as likely to as not, you would become embroiled with the Sport."

Gomes pondered over the matter for a few moments.

"Your scheme is good, I think, and I will do it. I will speak to Catalina, first securing her promise not to reveal the source of her information in case she speaks in regard to the affair to any one."

"Yes, for you cannot afford to have any trouble with Blake, unless you contrive a plan to catch him at a disadvantage."

"Very true; the man seems to have a demon's luck."

After having come to this conclusion the Cuban sought an opportunity to speak to Miss Blanco.

He did not seek her at the hotel, for he wanted it to appear as though he met her by accident.

The chance soon came.

On that very afternoon Catalina passed up the trail in search of wild flowers, which grew profusely near her favorite resort on the brow of the hill, where the Sport, Blake, had made her acquaintance, and saved her from the claws of the mountain lion.

Gomes took his shotgun, after the girl had been gone some ten minutes, and made a detour through the foot-hills so as to intercept her on the lights about.

The scheme succeeded, Gomes meeting Catalina face to face on the mountain-side.

"You have gathered quite a bouquet," the Cuban remarked, as he encountered the girl.

"Yes, and are they not beautiful!" she replied.

"Extremely so," he said. "Fair flowers and a still fairer owner."

"You are complimentary," she observed, acknowledging the remark with a smile.

"Oh, no; no compliment; it is the truth," he answered, gallantly. "By the way, Catalina, I met a gentleman recently who was well-acquainted with your father."

A cloud came immediately over the face of the girl, and it was plain from the expression upon her features that the subject was not a pleasant one.

"My father," she said, slowly.

"Yes, and this gentleman told me something in regard to your father that I think you ought to know, for I believe you are ignorant of it."

"It may be so, for I know very little of my father."

"I will gladly give you the information, provided you will give me your word not to reveal to any one from whom you received it."

"I will give you the promise, of course," Catalina replied, in her innocent way, never stopping to reflect upon the matter.

"I do not care to make an enemy of any one," Gomes explained. "And as what I have to say bears rather hardly upon a certain man in

this town, I prefer to keep in the background, although I am not asserting anything of my own knowledge, only telling the tale as it was told to me."

"I will not betray your confidence!" Catalina declared.

"Your father was named Manuel Escobedo, although you bear the name of Blanco."

"Yes, that was because my father had bitter enemies who pursued him with untiring hatred, and as he was obliged to place me in a convent to be brought up, he was afraid that his foes might discover my place of refuge and injure me, so I was concealed under a false name—not really false though, for Blanco, is my middle name."

"I judge from what I have been told that your father led a rather stormy life."

The girl sighed, it was evident the subject was a disagreeable one.

"I do not really know," she replied, after quite a pause. "I do not remember to have ever seen my father but twice in my life, and then I was so young that I cannot even recall his appearance, and as soon as I became old enough to understand, the suspicion came that my father was not well-thought of by the good people who had charge of me, and so I grew up almost as fatherless as though I did not possess a parent."

"Were you aware that your father died a violent death?"

"Yes, but I did not know aught of it until some years after the event, not until Madame De Belleville came to take me from the convent."

"It is a strange revelation that I am about to make," Gomes said, impressively. "The man who killed your father is now in this camp."

The girl's face grew a trifle white, and she fixed her eyes, with an earnest gaze, full on the Cuban's face.

"You are well acquainted with him. Your father, Manuel Escobedo, was killed near El Paso, on the Rio Grande, by this Sport, Blake."

A scornful expression appeared on the face of Catalina.

"And do you believe this tale?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt of it! There are a host of witnesses at El Paso who can tell you that it is the truth."

"All I require is the word of one man!" And with a slight inclination of her head she departed.

CHAPTER XXV.

CATALINA SEEKS THE SPORT.

THE Cuban remained rooted to the spot like a man suddenly transformed into a statue watching the graceful figure of the girl until she disappeared from view.

Then, with an effort, he roused himself from his abstraction.

"It is as I anticipated," he murmured. "She does not credit the tale."

"All she requires is the word of one man," he repeated. "That means that she will believe Blake in preference to a host of witnesses. If he declares that the story is a lie, and that he did not kill Manuel Escobedo, she will be satisfied that he speaks the truth."

"Oh, it is perfectly plain that she is madly in love with the fellow!" Gomes exclaimed, a despairing wail in his voice.

"Of course he will protest that the death of her father does not lie at his door. He would be a fool indeed to acknowledge the truth, particularly when he sees—as he must—that the girl has made up her mind to believe him, even if there is a dozen witnesses to the contrary."

From the above speech, it will be seen that the Cuban's faith in human nature was small. There was no doubt in his mind that Blake would be sure to descend to falsehood rather than speak the truth when questioned by the girl.

"Sanches was right," the Cuban remarked with a deep sigh, as he began to descend the trail to the camp. "He thought the story would not make much impression upon the girl, and that she would be more inclined to believe Blake innocent than guilty. He is a better judge of women than I—cursed, frivolous things that they are! Why has this girl with her beauty tangled me up in such a maze of passion?"

As will be seen, the Cuban was in a very unhappy state of mind.

Catalina had received the revelation so calmly, and said so little about it, that Gomes received the idea that it had not made much impression upon her, but this was not the truth, for the intelligence had disturbed her greatly, yet she had been strong enough not to betray the fact, thanks to her great powers of self-control, but her brain was in a whirl as she hurried down the trail to the camp.

"Oh, this is too dreadful!" she exclaimed, as she went rapidly on, excitement lending wings to her feet. "From the time that I first got the idea as a child that there was some dark mystery in regard to my father, I have dreaded a revelation which would shock my very soul."

"It has come at last, but not in the guise that I expected."

"My father—Manuel Escobedo—who was he—what was he? Ever has he been a mystery to

me. The convent people knew but little of him, but as I grew to years of discretion, I could see that they suspected much. And then my aunt, Isabel, when I came to live with her, and naturally asked for information in regard to my father, she always evaded my questions, saying that the subject was an extremely painful one to her, as her brother had been barbarously murdered, and it made her heart sick to recall the past, so in this way she put an end to my questions."

And then for a good ten minutes the girl strode on, her brows compressed with thought.

"How shall I learn the truth?" she exclaimed, abruptly. "I cannot endure to linger in this suspense."

"The Cuban has undoubtedly told me all he knows in regard to the matter, and, cunning, vile schemer that he is, his idea was to break up the friendship which exists between Mr. Blake and myself."

"I hate him!" she cried, clenching her little hands angrily. "If he was a true gentleman he would not descend to such a thing. He believes the report to be true because he wishes it to be so; but there is only one man whom I would be willing to believe in regard to the matter, and that is Mr. Blake himself!"

"I will go to him—I will frankly tell him all I have heard, and I have faith that he will not shrink from answering, no matter even if he thinks the truth will make an end of the friendship which now exists between us!"

And no sooner had Catalina arrived at this resolution than she determined to carry it out at once.

The girl was of a fiery, impetuous nature, and she could not brook delay, so, having determined to consult the Sport in regard to the matter, when she came to where the Chinese trail split off from the main road, she turned into it and kept on until she came to the lonely mine up in the foothills.

Blake occupied his favorite seat upon the tree-stump, and, as usual, he had a pack of cards in his hand, and being alone, he was amusing himself with a game of "solitaire," and so well had he handled the cards, aided, too, by a remarkable run of luck, that he was about winning when Catalina arrived upon the scene.

He hastened to complete the game, and then, rising, greeted the lady with a polite bow.

Catalina returned the salutation, after which she cast a quick glance around for the purpose of discovering if there was anybody in the neighborhood.

The Fresh understood the meaning of the look and hastened to explain.

"We are alone; no one is within earshot, and you need not fear to speak freely. Mr. Ringwood is in the cabin, but if we speak in an ordinary tone of voice he will not be able to overhear what we say, even if he desired to play the spy; but there is no danger of his doing anything of the kind, for he is a man who attends strictly to his own business."

"I have come to see you, Mr. Blake, upon a matter which possesses a deep interest for me, and I should much prefer that no one should know aught of the matter but ourselves."

"You are perfectly safe in speaking, and you can rest assured that our conversation cannot be overheard. There is no doubt about it," Blake replied.

"I presume it is in regard to the Red Dragon business," he added. "I know the time is drawing near when the assessment will have to be met; there are only three more days, but I am aware of the fact—I have not forgotten it, and I propose to make a move to-night, which I think will result in making a raise."

"Oh, no, it is not about the shares I have come," she observed. "I have not troubled my mind about them; you said you would attend to the matter, and I have relied implicitly upon your promise."

The perfect faith which the girl had in him, as betrayed by this speech, touched the veteran Sport deeply, and in his heart he registered a vow that, come what might, a most desperate fight he would wage on her behalf.

"You can depend upon me!" he exclaimed.

"I told you that before, and you can rely upon my doing all that mortal man can do. These lawyers are sharp fellows; there is no use of attempting to disguise the truth; I never make the mistake of underrating the enemy; they have managed the matter in an extremely skillful manner, and it will require extra good play, and an extraordinary run of luck to beat their game. I am going in as a kind of a forlorn hope, but sometimes an expedition of that kind pulls victory right out of the jaws of defeat, so to speak."

"Oh, yes, I understand that, and I have perfect confidence that you will do all you can for me, and if you do not succeed in winning, it will not be your fault," the girl remarked, the light of perfect trust shining in her great, black eyes.

"Indeed it will not; you may depend upon that!" the Sport asserted, earnestly.

"The subject upon which I wish to speak has nothing to do with the Red Dragon Mine, nor with this camp," Catalina remarked. "A certain revelation was made to me to-day, which

concerns you, and as I wish to ascertain whether it is true or not, I come directly to you."

There was a puzzled look in Blake's eyes as he gazed at the earnest face of the girl; he could see from the expression upon her features that she was deeply interested in the subject, whatever it was.

"It concerns me, eh?"

"Yes, most deeply."

"And are you too interested in it?"

"I am."

"Well, I judged so, although I confess I am utterly at a loss to guess what the subject is."

"It is a painful one," Catalina said, with a deep sigh.

"I am sorry for that, for I think you have had trouble enough already without being obliged to take more on your young shoulders."

"There is an old saying that the Lord fits the back to the burden, and although I am only a weak girl, yet I think I will be strong enough to bear up under all the trouble that may come upon me."

"Well, I sincerely hope so!" the Sport exclaimed. "And I must say that you are displaying the right kind of spirit. There is nothing like meeting trouble with a bold face and an upright head. The man who goes into a fight feeling confident that he cannot be whipped, stands a much better chance than the one who advances to the conflict with a dismal fear that he is going to be beaten."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly!" the girl assented.

"So fire away with what you have to say, and if I can give you any information, you can depend upon it that I will do so."

"Did you formerly live on the Rio Grande, near El Paso?"

The question was so entirely unexpected that it surprised the Sport, and he was at a loss to conjecture what was coming.

"Yes," he answered, after a moment's pause.

"A few years ago I did live on the Rio Grande, near the town you mention—on the American side of the river."

"And did you know a man named Manuel Escobedo?"

"Yes, I did."

"Manuel Escobedo was my father."

Blake started in astonishment.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLAKE TELLS HIS STORY.

THIS statement was so entirely unexpected that the Sport was taken completely by surprise, for no suspicion of any such thing had ever entered his head.

That Catalina was said to be a niece of Isabel Escobedo, he knew, but as he had never heard of Manuel Escobedo being married, he never for a moment suspected that she was his daughter.

There had been three of the Escobedos, Isabel, Manuel and an older sister, Dolores, who had been married to a wealthy American gentleman who resided in Texas; but this elder sister had been dead for some years when the Fresh made the acquaintance of Manuel and Isabel, and after Catalina made her appearance on the scene, introduced as Isabel's niece, Blake at once came to the conclusion that she was the daughter of the elder sister, particularly when it was said that she was an heiress.

He had never questioned Catalina in regard to the matter, for the Fresh was not of an inquisitive nature, and felt no interest in the affair.

He accounted for the fact that Catalina was so different from her relatives, whom he hated so bitterly, by surmising that the elder sister was not like her brother and Isabel. He had heard that it was so, and it had been stated that there had been no communication between Dolores and the others for years.

And now the announcement that Catalina was the daughter of the man between whom and himself a most deadly vendetta had existed, was a complete surprise.

"You are the child of Manuel Escobedo?" Blake exclaimed, as though he was reluctant to believe that he had heard aright.

"Yes, it is the truth."

For a full minute the Fresh gazed earnestly in the face of the girl, and then he shook his head slowly, saying:

"I cannot understand it. When I look in your face I cannot trace the slightest resemblance to either Manuel or Isabel Escobedo nor, for that matter, to any of the Escobedo line, and yet between all of the Escobedo blood there was a strong family likeness. My wife, Margaret, who was an Escobedo, the daughter of the old cattle king, although her mother was an American girl, yet she bore the family likeness, and any one looking at her and Isabel, would have seen that there was a resemblance, although they were entirely different in their style of beauty."

"It is strange, but I am an Escobedo, nevertheless."

"How comes it that you bear the name of Blanco?" the Fresh asked.

"That was my mother's name, and is also my middle name."

"Ah, yes, I see; but why were you not called Catalina Escobedo instead of Catalina Blanco?"

The girl then told the tale of how her father

feared she would be killed by his enemies and so had her reared as Catalina Blanco to throw them off the track.

The Sport shook his head.

"That explanation does not seem to be a satisfactory one to me," he remarked. "That the changing of your name was a device to throw any parties who might search for you off the scent is probable, but I very much doubt if it was done for any such reason as this one that has been given."

"What other reason could there have been?" asked the girl in astonishment.

Confident and trusting, she had accepted the explanation without question, and now that there was a doubt thrown upon it her mind was in a maze.

"Ah, that is a riddle which I cannot readily solve," the Fresh replied. "It is easier always to tear down than to build up. I feel almost certain that you have not been told the true reason why you should not bear the name to which you are entitled, but what the real cause for the deception is I cannot guess; it is beyond me."

"I begin to think you are right," Catalina said slowly, a perplexed expression on her features. "I never questioned the matter before. Truth to say, I never thought at all about it; I accepted the statement with implicit faith; but now your words have raised a doubt in my mind and I begin to see that it is possible I have been deceived, and yet I cannot see the object of the deception."

"These Escobedos are a cunning race; they shroud their acts with darkness, and it is not an easy matter to get at their motives," the Fresh remarked.

"And so you are the daughter of Manuel Escobedo," the Sport continued after quite a pause, during which time he was intently studying the beautiful face of the girl.

"Yes."

"Upon my word, it does not seem possible!" he declared. "Still, a child does not always resemble the father, and you may bear a striking likeness to your mother."

"I do not know anything about my mother. She died when I was a baby and I have never been able to learn aught of her," the girl remarked with a sorrowful air. "I once questioned Madame De Belleville, but she replied that she did not know anything about the matter. Her brother was married in Texas, and she was not aware of the fact until after the death of my mother, when her brother Manuel came with me, then an infant, and requested her to find some good home for his daughter."

"It is a very strange affair, and the more I reflect upon it the more I am convinced that there is some dark mystery at the bottom," the Fresh announced.

"But now that you have told me who you are, I can guess what revelation has been made to you, although I am a little puzzled to surmise who made it. The object, of course, is apparent to me at a glance; we are on friendly terms, and it is sought to make us enemies."

"Yes, that is the object, undoubtedly," the girl said, with a curling lip of scorn.

"And may I ask who is it that has taken the trouble to interfere in this matter?" the Sport asked.

"I—I cannot tell you," Catalina replied in some confusion, for the thought, for the first time, had flashed upon her that she had not acted wisely in giving the promise.

"I reckon I can guess how it is," the Fresh remarked, his natural shrewdness at once coming to his aid. "The party, whoever it was, got you to promise not to tell who told you."

"Yes."

"A cunning device to keep me from getting after him."

"I gave my word—it was foolish now, I see, but I acted heedlessly and without thinking."

"Oh, that is all right. I shall not ask you to be false to your promise, although I am rather puzzled to guess who there is in the town that is posted in regard to Manuel Escobedo; but it will come out in time, of course. Some day the man will be forced to come from the shadows into the light, and then I will have a chance at him."

"I know the tale you have been told; the party says I killed Manuel Escobedo."

"Yes—that you are my father's murderer," the girl said, slowly, her face white, and a sad look in her great, dark eyes.

"That statement is a falsehood!" Blake declared, emphatically. "I am no murderer—and least of all the murderer of Manuel Escobedo! Listen, while I tell you the truth, and, believe me, I shall speak naught else."

"I do believe you, and that is why I came to you the moment the tale was told to me; for I was satisfied that, whether you were guilty or innocent, you would speak the truth regardless of the consequences!" Catalina declared.

"You may rest assured I will!" the Fresh exclaimed. "Manuel Escobedo, whether your father, or not, was a black-hearted scoundrel, and at the time he met his death was the chief of an outlaw band known as the Red Riders of Rayon, a gang of reckless, bloodthirsty outlaws, who were the terror of the country along the

Rio Grande in the neighborhood of El Paso. I had a ranch there, and at the time of which I speak was courting Margaret Escobedo, who afterward became my wife; she was the heiress of the old Cattle King Estevan Escobedo, and cousin to Manuel and Isabel. It was the game of this precious pair to have Manuel marry the heiress. I was in the way, and, taking advantage of a favorable opportunity, Manuel attacked me at the head of his brigand band, but I had laid a trap for the Red Riders; my men were near at hand, and in the fight that followed, Manuel Escobedo was killed."

"It was commonly reported, and believed at the time, that Manuel was killed by me, and Isabel always laid his death at my door, but as Manuel was killed in a hot fight, it is an utter impossibility to decide whose hand really fired the fatal shot. It might have been mine, or Dave Ringwood, who was with me, or any of the rest of my men; that is a point which it is not possible to decide, but this I will say, to the best of my knowledge and belief I did not fire the fatal shot."

"It is a dreadful story," the girl said with a deep sigh, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

"The recital is not a pleasant one. I might bring in some special pleading to make my part in the matter appear a little better, say that I was but defending myself against the attack of a bloodthirsty gang of ruffians, who hungered for my slaughter, that it was only a question of whether I should kill or be killed, but I am content with what I have said."

"Mr. Blake, I believe you have told me the truth, and if Manuel Escobedo was my father I cannot blame you for his death, but oh! how earnestly I hope and pray that I may some day discover I am not his child!"

And then, overcome by emotion, Catalina hastened rapidly away.

The Fresh looked after her and shook his head, slowly.

"It maybe that she is of the Escobedo line but she bears no resemblance to the race," he murmured.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FRESH'S SCHEME.

AS Blake stood with his eyes fixed upon the figure of the girl, hurrying down the trail, Dave Ringwood came out from the cabin.

"Hello, a petticoat!" he exclaimed.

His voice roused the Fresh from his abstraction.

"Yes, Miss Blanco," and then he related the particulars of the interview. He did not hesitate to confide all to Ringwood for he knew he was perfectly trustworthy.

"Mighty queer affair," the other remarked.

"Yes, and now the question is, who told the girl—who is there in the camp that knows about that fight on the banks of the Rio Grande?" and as Blake spoke he resumed his seat upon the tree stump.

"Well, let me see," and Dave Ringwood also took a seat on the stump.

"Run the men in the camp over in your mind and see if you can fix upon any one who would be apt to be posted in regard to that affair."

Dave Ringwood reflected upon the matter for a few moments and then he shook his head.

"Don't strike any one?"

"No, can't say as I do."

"It would not be apt to be any of the old gang, for if it was, the matter would have got out before."

"Yes, that is true."

"Some new man then."

"It is likely."

"How does this block-headed Mexican fill the bill?"

"This John Black?"

"Yes."

"It is likely that he is the man," the other assented. "It is possible that he may be right from El Paso."

"Of course, and in that case might be acquainted with all the particulars of the affair."

"Certainly."

"If you remember, I told you I did not like the looks of the fellow the moment I set eyes on him."

"Yes, I recall the circumstance."

"And if you remember too, I said the fellow's face seemed familiar to me."

"That is so."

"And the more I reflect upon the matter the greater becomes my conviction that I have met the man somewhere before."

"But you cannot place him?"

"Exactly, and that is a bad sign for it is seldom that I am bothered about such a matter," the Fresh remarked. "I have a really wonderful memory for both names and faces, and yet this fellow puzzles me."

"He has a rather odd, strange appearance too," Dave Ringwood observed, reflectively.

"With that peculiar beard of his, after a man, who was good on faces, got a square look at him he ought to be easily remembered."

"Ah, it is the beard that makes the difficulty, I fancy."

"It is his own—there is no mistake about that; it is no false beard!" the other asserted.

"That is true; false beards are not common in real life, it is only in the detective novels that they flourish," the Fresh observed. "But I fancy that when I met the man before he was without a beard."

"Yes, yes, that would undoubtedly make considerable difference in his appearance."

"You can just bet it would! Shave off that heavy beard, so he will have a clean face, or allow him to retain a murtache and even an imperial, or chin-piece, and calculate what a difference it would make."

"Very true."

"The beard, as I have said, is, I am, satisfied, what bothers me about placing the man. It is very possible that he is some old El Paso acquaintance, or maybe one of Manuel Escobedo's brigand band—one of the Red Riders of Rayon. They were not all exterminated when we cleaned them out at the time that Manuel was killed."

"It is more than likely that this is some old pard of Manuel's," Dave Ringwood observed. "He has happened to find his way to this town, and has gone in to make trouble for you from the jump."

"Yes, and as soon as I have satisfied myself that he is the fellow that is at the back of this little game, I will go in to make trouble for him in a way that will be apt to make his hair stand on end!" the Fresh declared.

"No doubt you will make it lively for him."

"Yes, but there is no hurry about the matter. I have other fish to fry first. If the Mexican has got it in for me, he will be pretty apt to make some move so I can get a chance at him."

"I see, the old story, give the dog rope enough and allow him to hang himself."

"That is the idea, exactly. Wait and allow time for events to develop themselves. But, as I said, I have something else to attend to first—something which I think I shall set about right off."

"What is the game?"

"How does the moral aspect of this camp strike you just at present?" the Fresh asked, as grave as a judge.

Dave Ringwood was surprised by the question, and stared at his companion as much as to ask what he was driving at.

"Why do you stare? Haven't I asked a plain straightforward question? What do you think of the morals of this town of Slide-Out?"

"Well, that question, it seems to me, demands about the same kind of an answer as the old English sailor gave when asked concerning the manners and customs of the savages on whose island he was shipwrecked. 'They didn't have any manners, and their customs were blamed bad.' So I might reply, in regard to the moral aspect of this camp of Slide-Out, that it hasn't any."

"My own idea; the camp is in a bad way morally speaking."

"Y-yes, I think so, but what on earth are you coming at?"

"Drinking, gambling, and kindred vices rear here their horrid heads unchecked!" declared the Fresh, after the fashion of a stump speaker.

"You bet they do!" Dave Ringwood cried, emphatically. "It is as fast a little town as I ever struck!"

"Don't you think it would be a good field for a corps of the Salvation Army? wouldn't they find plenty of work to do?"

"Yes, and wouldn't the boys have lots of fun with the Salvation Army gang before they got through with them," and the sport laid back and roared at the idea.

"I reckon it would beat a circus all hollow. Well, as it is not likely that a Salvation Army band will ever find their way up in this neck of the woods, I reckon I will have to see what I can do in regard to reforming the town."

"Eh?" cried the other, in astonishment.

"Oh, I am in dead earnest—you can bet your life on it!" the Fresh declared. "But, being a sensible man, I do not propose to attempt impossibilities. As far as stopping the drinking of liquor goes, I don't believe prohibition will work; a man might as well attempt to beat back the advancing tides of old ocean with a shovel as to stop the drinking of liquor in a town like this."

"Right you are!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "If you tried a fight on that you would be whipped before you stepped in the ring."

"But there is one great vice in this camp that I feel I am competent to grapple with!" the Fresh declared.

"What is that?" the other asked, full of curiosity.

"Gambling! there is too much of it going on altogether for the good of the town!"

"No doubt, but I should really like to know how you propose to go in to check it."

"Why, it is as simple as A, B, C!" Blake declared. "Here's Mickey Harrigan, running a chuck-a-luck board in the Mule Pass Saloon. Well, chuck-a-luck, as a rule, is a pretty square kind of a game, that is, when the dealer is honest, but when Mickey gets a chance I am satisfied he rings in loaded dice and cheats his patrons in the most outrageous manner."

"Yes, particularly when they are well under

the influence of liquor," Dave Ringwood observed. "A man with any dust who goes in to win a small farm at Mickey's game don't stand much chance, for the cuss has a gang at his back always, and if the player gets a suspicion that he is being robbed and objects, the crowd make it warm for him."

"At early candle-lighting this evening I am going to tackle Smiling Mickey's game and bust it up, for when it comes to loaded dice, that is a game that two can play at, and if the gang object to the proceedings I will clean the gang out," the Fresh announced.

"I begin to see what you are coming at," the other remarked. "I understand how you are going to reform the gamblers of the town."

"After I finish Smiling Mickey I shall interview Mexican Joe. That wheel of fortune of his is a skin game from the word go!" Blake declared. "I was in there the other night and watched the game carefully for a while and I am satisfied that he has the wheel fixed so he can make the marble avoid certain numbers upon which heavy bets are placed. The percentage is big in favor of the bank, anyway, and I do not think it is the square thing for Mexican Joe to try any gum game, and so I will bust him all to smash!"

"And he has a gang at his back also."

"Well, I will have to clean them out too."

"You are undertaking considerable of a contract."

"The bigger the game the more I feel at home," the Fresh answered, briskly. "Then, after I have made a finish of the two dives I shall sail into Major Pete Houston. The State of Texas Saloon runs a square game, every time, and though I bear the major no ill-will, yet I will be obliged to skin the tiger and cut off his claws. These little jobs accomplished I shall wind up at the hotel where they tell me this General Clairborne plays a pretty stiff poker game, and now the question is, are you wid me?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE MULE PASS DIVE.

"Am I with you?" Dave Ringwood repeated.

"Oh, yes, you can be sure of that!"

"Now let me see," Blake observed, reflectively. "Where shall we make the first break?"

"How would the Mule Pass Saloon, Smiling Mickey's dive, answer?"

"Well, I reckon that would do; that is about as big a dive as there is in the town."

"No doubt about that," Dave Ringwood asserted. "Men who are good judges say that Smiling Mickey is one of the biggest beats in the camp."

"I don't know much about the fellow," the Fresh remarked. "I do not believe that I have been in his place a half a dozen times since I have been in the camp, yet from what I have seen of Smiling Mickey, I should say that he was a wolf, claws and all."

"He runs a mean, miserable game, anyway."

"A chuck-a-luck board, I believe."

"Yes," Dave Ringwood replied, "and men who know what they are talking about declare that when luck is running against Smiling Mickey, and there is a big stake on the board, he never hesitates to ring in loaded dice."

"That is just barefaced robbery, of course."

"Certainly; but that doesn't trouble him any, and when a fellow who is in liquor gets into the Mule Pass Saloon, he seldom is allowed to get out until Mickey and his gang have secured all the wealth the man possesses."

"Ringwood, old pard, it will really be doing good missionary work for me to go in and bust Smiling Mickey," Blake declared, in the most serious manner possible.

"Oh, yes! If there is a man in the camp of Slide-Out who ought to be jumped on with both feet it is the boss of the Mule Pass dive!" Dave Ringwood declared.

"I reckon I will have to try it on."

"You will probably have a fight, for Smiling Mickey is noted for being a bad loser," the other warned.

"Ah, he does not like to be skinned?"

"Oh, no! They say he kicks like a mule when the game goes against him."

"A man of that kind has no business to run a game!" the Fresh remarked, in his decided way.

"I have no patience with men who are all sunshine when the tricks are running in their favor, but who want to kick up a row and kill somebody when the luck goes against them."

"You are right there; such men have no business to play."

"Well, I reckon I will commence operations by a visit to the Mule Pass dive. I will see if I cannot clean out Smiling Mickey, and if he tries to ring in any loaded dice on me, perhaps I will be able to show him a trick in that line which will be apt to astonish his weak nerves."

"And you must keep your eyes open, too, for trouble," Dave Ringwood remarked. "He always has a gang hanging around his place, and if a man gets the best of the game he is seldom allowed to get away with the money."

"I see; the gang goes for him," the Fresh observed.

"Yes; and the man is lucky if he gets out alive."

"If that is the game that Smiling Mickey plays

we must be prepared to beat it. I calculate to skin Smiling Mickey in a scientific manner, and after the job is done I don't propose to allow any gang to take the wealth away from me."

"They will be apt to try it."

"Undoubtedly, and that is the reason why I want to clean out the dive. Such swindling concerns ought not to be allowed to exist. Now we must be prepared to meet insolence with violence, and as it is my experience that in all cases of this kind the first blow is half the battle we must get in our work before the gang have a chance."

Dave Ringwood thought this was a good idea and said so.

"We must arrange a signal so that we can act together, and so promptly that it will not be possible for the gang to get the drop on us."

"That is the idea!"

"And the signal must be such a one that the utterance of it will not give any intimation that we are about to go on the war-path."

"Of course, or otherwise we would not be able to spring the trap upon the gang."

"Now I think the words, 'I don't want to have any trouble,' will do first rate," the Fresh observed.

"I don't want to have any trouble," Dave Ringwood repeated.

"Yes, and the moment I get to the end of the sentence, whip out your shooting-iron and get ready for business as soon as you can."

"That scheme ought to work," the other observed, after meditating over the matter for a few moments.

"Well, it looks so to me; the words are peaceful enough, and it will take a mighty smart man to guess that it is a war signal that I am giving."

"You bet!" cried Dave Ringwood.

"That is all that is necessary, I reckon. After our tools are out we must act according to the circumstances of the case, bearing in mind that we have a tough gang to contend with, and we cannot afford to throw away a chance; we must take every trick we can to win the game."

This ended the important part of the conversation and the rest that followed, being of no importance, we will not occupy space in detailing.

The pards stayed at home all the rest of that day and about eight o'clock in the evening the two left their cabins and descended the trail which led to the camp.

Both had taken the precaution to see that their revolvers were in good working order, for they realized that they were entering upon an expedition where their lives might depend upon the workings of their weapons.

Upon entering the camp they proceeded directly to the Mule Pass Saloon.

As Ringwood had said, this was one of the worst dives in the town.

It was on the outskirts of the camp, a small concern kept by a beetle-browed fellow whose peculiar habit of grinning and showing his teeth had gained for him the nickname of Smiling Mickey.

The saloon-keeper was anything though but a pleasant-looking, jovial fellow, and his everlasting grin had decidedly more of menace in it than merriment, hyena-like.

The pards went up to the bar and had a glass of ale, and then they turned their attention to the chuck-a-luck board, over which Smiling Mickey presided in person.

There were about a dozen people in the place, but four of them were hangers-on—Smiling Mickey's gang; the rest miners who had dropped in to pass away the time, either by trying their luck at the game, or by watching others play.

It was all fish that came to Smiling Mickey's net. The man who was afraid to risk more than two bits at a time, was as welcome as the fellow who showed that he possessed wealth by staking a dollar.

It was chiefly the small fry sports who patronized the Mule Pass game; there were more twenty-five cent bets than any others, and rarely did anybody stake over a dollar.

The pards watched the game for awhile without making any bets, much to the dissatisfaction of Smiling Mickey.

He knew that the two had money, particularly the Fresh, who bore the reputation of being one of the greatest plungers in the town.

"Come, gents, try yer luck!" smiling Mickey exclaimed, in a persuasive way. "Remember, ye can't win if yer don't bet, and now is the very time to hump yerself. Any man w'ot is running in big luck, and puts his dust down onto this board, will have a chance to make a small farm!"

"Ah, that is the old gag, Mickey!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"Mebbe it is old, but it is good, and it goes, all the same!" the gambler replied. "Come, Mister Blake, you are one of the lucky galoots; make a few bets, and show the rest of the gents how easy it is for a man to make a big strike if he only has the ducats to start on, and plenty of gall to believe that he kin make the raffle!"

"Oh, the game is too small—eh, Ringwood, what do you think?" Blake questioned.

"Yes, rather small," the other answered. "A man would have to play for a long time to make anything at two bits a lick."

"Oh, but you kin thrown down a dollar, or

five, for that matter, if you want to make the game interesting," Smiling Mickey replied.

"Five would be better than one, and ten better than five," Blake declared.

"Oh! I reckon you are trying to skeer me now!" the gambler cried.

"Not at all!" the Fresh declared. "If it was my game to frighten you out of your boots, I would talk to you of a hundred ducats at a lick!"

"Now, now, I reckon you are putting it on pretty thick, but I s'pose you are only talking jist for fun; you don't reckon to make no hundred dollar bet in this hyer game!" Smiling Mickey declared.

"I will go you two hundred if you dare to take it up!" and with the words, the Fresh drew the money from his pocket, and flourished it in the face of the gambler.

This bold defiance astonished all within the saloon, and they looked with wonder upon Blake.

"Two hundred dollars!" exclaimed Smiling Mickey, in amazement.

"That is what I said, and that is the kind of a hairpin I am!" Blake affirmed.

"You want to bet two hundred dollars at a lick?"

"Yes, sir, that is my little game."

"And what number will you put it on?" the gambler asked, sorely tempted.

"On eighteen, so I will have to throw three sixes to win, and I want the privilege of throwing the dice myself, too!"

"Oh, that is all right," Smiling Mickey remarked.

He had the dice in the box, and now he slipped his hand down in his lap, and while he pretended to look at the board, changed the good dice for a set of loaded ones, so arranged that the sixes could not be thrown.

"All right, I will go you; put up yer money and hyer's the box!"

Down went the cash, the Fresh took the box, flourished it in the air, and as he did so he "palmed" the dice, substituted three of his own, then cast them on the board.

Smiling Mickey uttered a cry of horror as the dice showed up three sixes!

CHAPTER XXIX.

BLAKE SETTLES SMILING MICKEY.

THE Irishman could hardly believe his eyes; he glared at the figures upon the bone cubes as though he expected them to turn into something else.

"Eighteen!" the Fresh exclaimed, in a tone of triumph. "Now that is what I call a pretty good throw, and it is safe to say that a man might try the raffle twenty times and not once show up three sixes. Mickey, I will trouble you for two hundred dollars!"

And before the astonished gamester comprehended what he was about, the Fresh picked up his money with his right hand, shoving the bills at once into his pocket, and the dice with his left, which he pretended to examine, but, by a dexterous palming, as the jugglers term this sort of trick, he changed the dice for the ones which really belonged to the gambler.

"I have half a mind to buy these little bits of bone from you," Blake continued, "for they have done me a good turn to-night, and I think I would like to own them."

Then he carelessly put the dice down again on the table. His right hand was in the pocket of his coat where it had conveyed the bills, and by this time it grasped the trusty seven-shooter, so as to be ready for action.

"I don't understand this at all, at all!" the Irishman protested.

"Don't understand what?" exclaimed Blake, sharply. "It seems to me that it is as plain as the nose on your face! I put two hundred dollars on number eighteen. I threw three sixes, eighteen, and therefore you owe me two hundred dollars; fork over the cash and oblige the subscriber."

"There's divil's woruk 'bout this game!" the Irishman declared, enraged and disgusted. "Ye couldn't be afther t'rowin' eighteen!"

"But I *did* throw it!" Blake cried. "There is no doubt about the matter! Didn't you see the spots with your own eyes, three sixes? I appeal to all these gentlemen if I did not throw the number fairly and squarely!"

The game had attracted the attention of every one in the saloon, and there were plenty of miners to declare that the Sport had thrown eighteen.

The gang who backed Smiling Mickey were gathered at the back of his chair, and as they anticipated that a fight was coming, they were beginning to finger their weapons.

"You see, these gentlemen confirm my statement," the Fresh remarked. "But it is really ridiculous for you to make any talk about the matter. You *know* I threw eighteen! You are not blind! You saw the dice with your own eyes."

"There's some diviltry in it, I tell ye!" raved Smiling Mickey, anything but smiling now.

"Ye couldn't t'row eighteen wid thim dice!"

"Oh! you thought you had rung in loaded dice on me, eh?" the Sport exclaimed. "And by some mistake you gave me an honest pair!"

It is the old story over again; the engineer hoist by his own petard! Now, Mickey, I don't want any trouble—"

And then out, like a flash, came the right hand of the Fresh from his pocket, and the Irishman was "covered" with the revolver.

At the same moment Dave Ringwood, who had been lounging, carelessly, at Blake's side, with both of his hands in his pockets, withdrew the hands showing that each one grasped a revolver, and with the weapons he menaced the gang at Smiling Mickey's back.

For a moment there was a tableau of astonishment.

The voice of Jackson Blake broke the silence.

"If you will take the trouble to survey the situation calmly, my dear friend Mickey, you will, I think, make the discovery that I have got the drop on you," he said, in a very mild and gentle way.

"This is the first time that I have ever 'stacked' up against your little game, but as I have heard that you were an extremely bad loser when the stake was a heavy one, and disposed to kick if you did not have things all your own way, I made up my mind that if I won any money at your table I would have it, or know the reason why!"

"Oblige me by forking over two hundred dollars, and quickly, too, for I am a gentleman who does not like to be kept waiting."

"This is robbery!" the Irishman howled, in a fearful rage.

"Don't you dare to call me a robber, you Irish bog-trotter, or I will drill a hole right through you!" Blake threatened, and there was a glint of fire in his eyes which awed the other.

"Two hundred dollars, quickly, or I will settle your game here for good and all by settling you!" Blake threatened.

The Irishman "weakened," to use the terse Westernism.

He pulled out his money, but after producing his wealth, found that he had only one hundred and ninety five dollars.

"And that is ivery penny that I have to me name!" he exclaimed, with a doleful whine. "It is after breaking the bank ye ar!"

"That is my little game!" the Fresh declared.

"There are too many of you two-cent skin gamblers in this hyer camp of Slide-Out, and I am going in as a moral reformer to wipe some of you out."

The announcement gently tickled the crowd, and the miners testified to their delight by a loud outburst of laughter.

"The hundred and ninety-five will do for the present, Mickey," the Sport continued. "You can hand me the other five at any time. I would not take all your roll now, but I am satisfied that you have a little put away for a rainy day."

Then the Fresh took the money and stuffed it into his pocket.

"I will get even with ye for this 'fore many a day has come and gone!" the Irishman cried, in an extremely ugly way, as he saw his money disappear in the pocket of the Sport.

"Mickey, my dear fellow, don't treasure such things up; go by my rule, which is to always settle a matter of this kind as soon as possible. Follow me out into the street: I will give you time to get out your 'gun,' and then I pledge you my word that I will fix you for planting with both neatness and dispatch."

The Irishman was almost frantic with rage, the idea of being so easily beaten at his own game was galling in the extreme, and though since he had taken up his abode in the camp he had seldom gone into a fight without being backed by all his gang, so that his opponent stood an extremely poor show, yet, on this occasion, his anger led him to accept Blake's challenge.

"All right—I'm yer man!" he exclaimed. "But by the powers it is not me that will be afther fixed for plantin' but yerself, do ye mind!"

"Just as you say, but I will go you a hundred that I knock you over at the first fire, and I will not more than half-try either!" the Fresh replied, in his careless, happy-go-lucky way.

And then he and Dave Ringwood backed out into the street, being careful to keep their faces toward the Irishman and his gang so they could not be surprised.

The miners followed, all eager to secure good places from which the fight might be witnessed without danger, for bullets in a street fight have no respect for persons, and are just as ready to send an innocent bystander to Kingdom Come as the heroes of the battle.

Blake took a position in the middle of the street, some fifty feet away from the saloon, while the miners flattened themselves against the houses on both sides of the way, eager not to miss a bit of the show, and yet anxious to get out of harm's way.

Smiling Mickey came marching out into the street, pistol in hand, his gang behind him, but they remained in the doorway.

There was a bright moon which rendered all objects almost as distinct as by day, so there was plenty of light for the battle.

As the two confronted each other a hush came over the scene, so that the exclamation of old

Ben Prince who was trying to negotiate a bet on the fight was plainly heard.

"I tell yer it is dollars to doughnuts on Blake!" he cried.

The words nettled the Irishman, although he had not gained any reputation as a fighter since coming to the camp.

"Are ye ready, ye murthurin' thafe of the world?" Smiling Mickey cried.

"All ready—let her go, Gallagher!" the Fresh replied.

Up came the revolver of the Irishman to the level, and he began to take a deliberate aim at the Sport.

There was murder in Smiling Mickey's heart; he had determined to kill the Fresh if he possibly could.

But what chance in a fight of this sort did a man stand who dwelt upon his aim when opposed to a champion snap-shot like the Fresh of Frisco.

Hardly had the Irishman's revolver reached the level when the report of Blake's weapon broke the stillness of the night.

The Sport fired so quickly that many believed that the weapon had been accidentally discharged.

The Irishman's behavior soon convinced them though that this was an error.

Smiling Mickey dropped his weapon as though it had suddenly become red hot, capered around for a moment, holding on to his right elbow with his left hand and yelling "Wow, wow!" at the top of his lungs, and then, all of a sudden, sunk down in a heap.

"Better carry him into the house and send for a doctor," the Fresh remarked. "I grazed his funnybone with my bullet and I reckon he's got it in his side. 'Tisn't a hearse matter, I think, but there's no telling how the things will turn out sometimes."

"Now, while I have got my hand in, if there is any pard of Smiling Mickey's who wants to take up this quarrel I am agreeable."

But after this display of the Sport's marksmanship none of the Irishman's gang were willing to face the victor.

The wounded man was removed and the miners gathered around Blake and congratulated him, but he got away from them as soon as he could and, with Ringwood, entered the saloon of Mexican Joe.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

MEXICAN JOE'S place was a new one in the camp, having only been running some two weeks and was known as "The Wheel of Fortune."

It had a small bar where an extremely poor quality of whisky, even for the mining regions, could be purchased, but the principal attraction was the gambling game which the Mexican termed the wheel of fortune.

This was the same idea as the old game of roulette, only more simple.

There were spaces in the wheel, which was a wooden circle, springing around a center pin, laid flat upon a table, and these spaces were numbered.

The players put their money on the numbers they fancied, and when all had made their game, a marble was dropped upon the wheel and the circle sent springing around; when it stopped, the marble found a resting-place in one of the depressions where the numbers were, and that particular number was said to have won and the player received from the "bank" as much money as he had ventured, all the rest of the players losing and the bank taking whatever sums were bet.

As will be seen the "bank" had a pretty good thing of it; only one player could win, while the rest most lose, and if the marble stopped upon a number upon which no money was bet it was not counted a go, and the wheel was made to revolve until some player did win.

The attraction of the game was that some one must win, and each player fondly hoped it would be he.

The miners never stopped to calculate the great odds in favor of the bank. If there were eight players, seven must lose while only one could win.

In spite of all this advantage it was currently whispered and believed by the old sports, who were up to a thing or two, that the Mexican had some arrangement by means of which he could elevate or depress the sides of the wheel so that the marble could not find a resting-place upon any number where a heavy bet was placed.

Blake firmly believed this and he remarked to Dave Ringwood after they had entered the saloon and watched the game for some time:

"This is the biggest wolf of the lot. The fellow is not satisfied with the big percentage in favor of the game, but he is cheating all the time."

Any bet from "two bits" upward was taken, and Blake and Ringwood, both old sports, soon noticed that any man who bet over two bits seldom won anything, though, once in a while, as if to encourage the players, a one or two dollar bet came up "smiling," as Blake remarked.

"I am going in to beat this fellow at his own game," the Fresh said in Dave Ringwood's ear.

"This is not the first time I have run across a

game of this kind, and I have usually succeeded in beating it pretty badly, and if this Mexican Joe is not posted in regard to my trick I will skin him in the worst kind of way. I have got to go out for a few minutes to fix my game, and while I am gone you begin to play; don't risk more than a dollar until I come into the game, then go a fiver, and when I give you the signal by caressing my chin, plump down a ten."

"All right, I will do it," Dave Ringwood answered.

"And after the big play commences, have your weapons ready, for there will be a kick, sure, when I spring the trap."

The other nodded and Blake sauntered out.

Dave Ringwood watched the game for a few minutes—there were six to eight playing—and then he ventured a half-dollar and was lucky enough to win; but two more bets of a dollar each he lost.

Then Blake returned and came up to the table.

"Hello! have they roped you into the game, Dave?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I am taking a few flyers just for luck," the other replied.

"Will you not try your luck, señor?" Mexican Joe asked, persuasively. He was a tall, dark man with an evil-looking face. "It is a grand game! There are no blanks, gentlemen; some one must win every time."

"What is your limit?" Blake inquired, drawing out of his pocket a small buckskin bag, such as was in common use among the miners, answering for a pocketbook or wallet.

"Oh, there is no limit!" the Mexican replied, with a true gallic shrug of the shoulders.

"No limit! thunder and lightning! you are running the biggest kind of game then!" the Fresh exclaimed apparently in great wonder. "Suppose a man comes in and bucks you for two or three thousand dollars?"

The Mexican laughed.

"Ah, my dear sir, I fancy that such a man seldom makes his appearance in this camp."

"Well, you said there was no limit."

"I meant in reason—I am not a millionaire; I own no gold mines, but if you wish me to set a figure I will say five hundred dollars. The man who can win five hundred dollars off me breaks my bank."

"I am going for you, old man, but I say I want to put the bag down just as it is," the Fresh remarked.

The Mexican looked surprised and the rest stared.

"You propose to bet what is in the bag?" the gambler asked.

"Yes, that is my game!"

"And without letting any one know what it is?"

"Yes, going it blind, so to speak."

The Mexican pondered over the matter for a few moments: the idea was so odd that he did not know exactly what to make of it.

"It is a strange way to bet," he remarked, "but I think I will take it."

"Why, you are safe enough; you cannot pay any more than is in the bag if I win, and you will not get any more if I lose."

"Go ahead; make your game, gentlemen!" the Mexican announced.

"I'll put my ducats on number thirteen!" the Fresh exclaimed as he put the buckskin bag on the wheel. "Most people think thirteen is unlucky, but some of the best pieces of luck that I have ever had in my life have been connected with the number thirteen."

The others who wished to play made their bets, Dave Ringwood putting a five-dollar gold-piece on the six.

Around went the wheel and a man who had only bet four-bits won.

The Fresh shook out the contents of the bag and a solitary dollar-bill dropped on the table.

This created a general laugh, for all imagined that the Fresh had ventured five or ten at the least, for he was known to be a reckless and daring bettor.

"Oh, you may laugh, gentlemen, but I am going slow until I get the hang of the game, and then I intend to put up so big a bet that it will clean out the concern!" Blake announced.

This created another smile, and the Mexican, in particular, indulged in a huge grin, showing his white teeth.

"Ah, my dear sir, that is what I am looking for—the man who is not afraid to make big bets!" he exclaimed.

"You will find me right after you, just as soon as I see how the old thing works!" Blake declared.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" Mexican Joe cried.

Blake turned a little aside and prepared his bag again.

Again the wheel went round and this time a two dollar bet won.

Blake shook four quarters out of the bag.

"Say, if you don't let me win once in a while I am going to quit!" he declared.

"Have patience!" the Mexican replied.

"Your turn will come. Now, gentlemen, put up your money again—make your game!"

Again the Fresh turned a little apart and apparently prepared his bag, but, in reality, he

put the bag he had been using into his pocket and took out another one, so exactly like the first that no one could tell them apart.

The players were beginning to get excited over the game and some pretty good bets were made this time.

The Fresh gave the signal to Dave Ringwood and he put ten dollars on the seven, a proceeding which made the eyes of the Mexican glitter.

"Ah, gentlemen, that is the way to bet!" he exclaimed. "There is some satisfaction in sending the wheel around when there is a good sum of money at stake."

"Some of us will strike you heavy this time!" the Fresh declared.

"I shall be delighted to pay the gentleman who wins no matter how heavy the bet is!" the gambler answered.

"Have you all made your game gentlemen?"

A couple more of the miners, carried away by the excitement, invested a few dollars in the game.

And while they were staking their money, Blake made a rapid calculation of the situation.

"All the heavy bets are on the other side of the wheel," he murmured under his breath. "It can hardly be possible that the machinery can be so arranged that he can direct the marble to any number he wishes; he may be able to keep it away from a certain number by sending it to the other side of the board; if that is the way the trick is worked I stand a good chance for my white alley this feat."

Around went the wheel, all the spectators anxiously watching the course of the marble; little by little its pace slackened until at last it rolled into number thirteen.

The Fresh of Frisco had won.

"Aha! I thought I would get a chance to skin you this time!" the Sport exclaimed. "Now then prepare to shell out your wealth!"

The Mexican laughed.

"Ah, my friend, I am afraid the amount that you will win from me this time will not take up much room in your bag."

"Well, I don't know about that," Blake replied. "I made a pretty heavy bet this time."

And then taking up the buckskin bag he shook the contents out on the table.

First came two half dollars and then a roll of bank bills.

The eyes of the Mexican distended with rage.

"I reckon I will take about five hundred dollars out of you, if you please," Blake remarked.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ANOTHER DIFFICULTY.

"Five hundred dollars!" Mexican Joe cried in amazement.

"That is the exact sum I want," the Fresh answered, smiling in the face of the other in the most good-natured way.

The Mexican was astounded; he knew not what to make of this strange affair. That some sharp trick had been played upon him he felt certain, but he was so perplexed and annoyed by the heavy loss that his mind did not work with its usual cleverness, and he was not able to see how the thing had been done.

"Five hundred dollars!" he exclaimed, with an angry frown. It was apparent that the Mexican was as bad a loser as the Irishman.

"That is the sum; you said that was your limit, you know, and I made up my mind to break your bank, if it took me all night," the Fresh declared. "But you see I am playing in big luck now, for I made my strike early in the game."

The Mexican was extremely disgusted, but as he saw no way to escape from paying the bet, he slowly counted out the money.

It took all he had, with the exception of a single five-dollar gold-piece.

Blake gathered up the money and put it into his pocket; then he took a look at the gold-piece which lay on the table.

"Say, sport, I always like to make a clean sweep when I go about it, and I will match you for that coin."

The gambling instinct of the other was roused, and he quickly accepted the offer.

"Good! I will do it!" and he clapped his hand over the gold-piece.

Blake drew a five-dollar coin from his pocket.

"Will you match me, or I you?"

"You are to match me."

"If they are alike, then I win!"

"Yes."

Blake put his gold-piece down beside the other.

All in the room crowded near, eager to see the result.

The Mexican removed his hand, Blake did the same, and the crowd drew a long breath.

Both were heads; the Fresh had won again.

"Caramba!" cried Mexican Joe, in a rage, "you have the devil's own luck!"

"You must not swear!" Blake exclaimed, reprovingly. "If you do you will not be able to win at any game." And then, with an air indicative of a deal of satisfaction, he pocketed the gold-piece.

"Well, gentlemen, that ends matters to-night for me!" Mexican Joe announced. "The bank is broke, and the game shuts!"

"I tell you, boys, I am doing good work in closing up these little games," the Fresh remarked. "This is the second game that I have forced to quit to-night; Smiling Mickey was the first victim. If my run of luck keeps on I reckon I will break every gambling shop in the town before morning. I am the biggest moral reformer that ever struck this camp!"

This created a general laugh, and Blake turned to depart.

Then, suddenly, into the mind of Mexican Joe flashed a suspicion; he thought he had guessed how the Fresh had been able to best him at his own game, and he grew wild with rage.

"Stop!" he thundered, "come back here and return me my money—you have robbed me, you miserable North American scoundrel!"

The Fresh faced about instantly. His hands were in his coat pockets, and hardly one present but suspected that they grasped weapons.

"What is that you say, you Mexican hound?" Blake cried fiercely.

The hand of the gambler was on the revolver belted to his side, ready for action.

"Oh, you have played a smart game, and I was a fool that I did not see through it before!" the Mexican exclaimed, hot with rage.

"I understand now what your little game was with the buckskin bag, and I was a fool to allow myself to be caught by so shallow a trick. You had the bills concealed in the bag all the time, but when you lost, you only shook out the silver money!"

"Well, the scheme might have been worked in that way, but I defy you to prove that I did the trick!" the Fresh retorted.

"You did—you know you did, you robber!"

"Come, come, no names, or else I will have to warn you!" Blake threatened.

"Are you going to give me back my money?" the Mexican fairly howled.

"Oh, you are away off your base!" the Sport exclaimed. "What kind of a man do you take me to be, and what kind of a game do you think you can play? You lost your money fairly and squarely, and now you squeal and want it back. Did you ever give back a single dollar of the many hundreds that you have won?"

"But you have robbed me! it was not a fair game!" the Mexican protested. "You had no right to bet with your money in a bag so that no one could see how much you were risking."

"If your game is a square one, what difference does it make whether you saw my money or not—whether I bet one dollar or one thousand?" the Fresh demanded. "But your game is a brace and a swindle from 'wayback. You have got your wheel arranged so that you can make any particular number lose every time, if you want to work it that way. If you had known that I had made a big bet, I would have stood no more chance to win than a hog does of going to heaven! That is the reason that I put my stake in a bag, so as to fool you in regard to the amount. You accepted the bet without any question; you lost; I have the ducats, and you can bet all the wealth that you are ever likely to get hold of in this world that I am going to keep them too!"

"For the last time, will you give me my money?" the Mexican demanded, and he cast a glance at his gang as if to warn them to be ready for action.

"Oh, go easy, I don't want any trouble"—and then out came Blake and Ringwood's weapons.

But the Mexican was so hot with rage that, despite the fact of being taken at a disadvantage, he attempted to give battle.

"Kill them, kill them!" he yelled, plucking forth his weapon, and his gang followed his example.

The sports saw that the Mexicans were resolved upon war, and understood there was no time to waste, so they opened fire immediately.

Sharply rung out the reports of the revolvers; both Blake and Ringwood had self-cockers, and, thanks to this advantage, they routed the Mexicans before they could fire a shot.

The gambler was the first to fall, going down behind the table with a bullet in the shoulder which crippled him for the time being.

Three of the gang bit the dust, for every bullet fired by the pards went straight to its mark, and the rest fled in terror out of the back door, and the miners, who were in the place, fled in wild confusion the moment the fight began, going through the doors or the windows, whichever was handiest.

Never was a room more speedily cleared.

Then, after the Mexicans retreated, Blake and Ringwood made their way to the street.

A crowd began to collect, attracted by the noise of the shots.

"What's up—what's up?" was the cry.

"It's that durned fresh rooster, Blake, cleaning out Mexican Joe's shebang!" was the answer the miners gave.

The crowd set up a shout when the pards made their appearance.

"I reckon the picnic is over, boys," Blake remarked, acknowledging the salutation of the miners. "And if Mexican Joe has got any friends in this crowd they had better go in and attend to him for I think he needs it."

But though none of the miners were willing to acknowledge that they were friends of the

wounded gambler, yet quite a number were good-hearted enough to go to his assistance.

"Now for the State of Texas Saloon," Blake remarked to Ringwood, as the two proceeded down the street.

"If we keep on as we have begun I reckon we will have quite a lively evening."

"Yes, I should say so," Ringwood assented.

When the pards entered Major Pete Houston's saloon they found a goodly number assembled there.

The faro and keno games were in full blast and behind the faro table sat Major Pete in person engaged in dealing.

He nodded in the most friendly manner to the sports when they approached the table.

"How is business?" Blake asked.

"Well, it is a little quiet to-night," the major responded. "But the evening is young yet, and I reckon things will pick up pretty soon."

"I think I will try you for awhile so as to help things along," the Fresh remarked.

"Glad to have you, and I will try to treat you right," the veteran responded.

"Give me two hundred dollars worth of chips, tens," Blake said to the cashier, pushing over his money.

This liberal order made the rest of the players open their eyes, for none of them had bought more than fifty dollars' worth of chips, and all had taken lives.

"You are kinder trying to skeer the old man, I reckon," the major remarked, with a smile.

"Ah, well, when a man goes in to play a game, he might as well go in deep enough to make it interesting," the Fresh observed.

"Yes, you are right thar," Houston remarked. "But then men can't always stand the racket; a good many of them ain't built that way."

"That is correct; but then there's an old saying, you know, that there is no use being a fellow, unless you are a deuce of a fellow!"

"Upon my word, Mr. Blake, without any desire to flatter you, I must say I think you will fill the bill every time!" the major exclaimed.

"You are a high roller—that is, if I am any judge of the article."

"Well you ought to be, a man of your years and experience. I suppose you have dealt faro in almost every city of any size in the country?"

"Yes, in the West, but I have never been East."

"What is your limit, by the way?" Blake inquired, carelessly.

"No limit, sir, at all."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FRESH MAKES IT INTERESTING FOR THE MAJOR.

The cards had just run out, and Major Pete was huffing them for a new deal while this conversation went on.

"No limit, eh?"

"That is what I said, Mr. Blake," the veteran gambler responded, in his courteous way. "I set hyer for business, and the bigger the pile that a man puts up on a card the better I like it."

"Now, major, you are talking, and no mistake," the Fresh exclaimed. "That is the kind of platform that I admire. I suppose if a sport now, like myself, for instance, should waltz in here with the notion that he could break the bank if he got a good ready on, you would receive him with all the honors."

"You bet, sir!" the veteran exclaimed. "He would be entitled to the best in the house, and he would get it, too, every time!"

"Major, you are a sporting man of the old school, and I am glad that such a man as you holds forth in this camp!" the Fresh announced.

The veteran acknowledged the compliment by a courtly bow.

"And as you say there is no limit to the game I reckon you had better give me three hundred dollars' worth more of chips, tens please," the Fresh continued.

This investment made the bystanders open their eyes, and even Major Pete looked astonished.

Never since the game had begun had any player bought five hundred dollars' worth of chips at one time.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I must say that this really does look like business," the major observed.

"Oh, yes; as one of the ancient Roman sports once observed, I am going to carry the war into Africa."

The chips were counted out, and Blake, helping himself to a seat, arranged them in five piles before him; Dave Ringwood leaned over his chair.

"Now, gentlemen, make your game, if you please," said the major, in the metallic, mechanical voice peculiar to the faro-dealer.

"That queen is a good-looking young woman," the Fresh observed. "And as I am rather partial to young ladies, I think I will put some wealth on her," and as he spoke he placed ten chips on the card.

This proceeding caused the rest to stare, for it was but seldom that any player made a bet

above ten dollars, and he was counted a bold plunger indeed who risked twenty-five or thirty upon the turn of a card.

Five or six small bets were made, and the deal proceeded.

The fourth losing card which came out of the silver box was a queen, and the "bank" raked in Blake's stake.

"The queen is a true woman, and inclined to be coquettish," the Fresh observed. "But I have always noticed that the ladies like a bold and persevering wooer, and so I will try the lady again."

And then, to the wonder of all, he put *two hundred dollars* on the queen.

The lookers-on drew a long breath; this was right royal play.

The first losing card that came out was a queen, and an involuntary "ah!" ascended on the air from the lips of the interested throng.

"Give me two hundred dollars more," said the Fresh, pushing the money over to the cashier.

The demand was complied with.

"'Faint heart never won fair lady,' says the proverb, and so I will try the queen again," the Fresh announced, and this time he put *four hundred dollars* on the card.

For a moment the lookers-on almost held their breath, so astonished were they at the reckless bet, and even the veteran sport, Major Pete, looked a little sober as he saw the stake.

"You have cleaned me out twice, but it seems to me that I ought to catch you in this heat," Blake observed.

And, sure enough, the first winning card out of the box was a queen, so that at one stake the Fresh got back the three hundred which he had lost and a hundred dollars besides.

Blake made no more bets until the deal was out.

"I reckon I will try the ace of diamonds this time," he remarked, as Major Pete was shuffling the cards. "I like diamonds, and many a time a diamond has got me out of trouble, and the ace answers to a solitaire pin, which is my favorite ornament when I go in to put on style."

And, suiting the action to the word, he put a hundred on the ace of diamonds.

The brows of Major Pete Houston contracted. He began to have an idea of the kind of game which the sport intended to play.

He did not say anything though and the game went on.

The ace lost, then the Fresh put two hundred on the same card and away at the end of the deal the ace came up smiling.

Again was the sport a hundred ahead on the deal.

"I see, you are playing a system," the veteran remarked, as he shuffled the cards for a new deal.

"Yes, a sort of system," Blake admitted.

"When you lose, stick to the same card and double your stake, and keep on until you win," the dealer observed.

"I reckon you have got it down fine," Blake replied.

"Well, I don't know but what that system is as good as any of them," the old sport said, reflectively. "Since I have been handling the pasteboards I have run up against a great many systems, all of them sure things, and bound to beat the bank every time."

"Yes, almost every man who plays faro gets bit by a thing of that sort once in a while," Blake declared. "The woods are full of men who have worked out a system that is sure to beat the bank, if they can only raise the ducats to enable them to try it on, but in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand the thing don't work as it ought to, and the bank gobbles the money."

"Yet I have seen men who understood faro from A to ampersand get up a system and make big money out of it."

"But it was no sure thing, though; it didn't always work."

"No, that is a fact, it did not," the dealer admitted.

"If you will look back and recall the circumstances carefully, I reckon you will see that luck had a good deal to do with the success of the system," Blake observed, shrewdly. "When the man was playing in big luck the system ran all right; it was a success and the bank suffered; when the player was away off on his luck, the system was no good and he lost his ducats."

"Well, I reckon you are about right."

"This system of mine is as good as any!" the Fresh declared. "I have tried about all that were ever got up, I reckon, and put big money into some of them, which I saw scooped up like a little man, so I have settled back on this thing, which is simple and works like a charm, if my luck is all right."

"You have done pretty well so far," Major Pete observed, as he put the cards in the box.

"Oh, I am playing in big luck to-night!" the Fresh asserted. "And you, as an old sport, know how it is, major; when a man finds that he is in luck he ought to push it for all it is worth before the luck goes back on him."

"Yes, that is so," Major Pete replied, slowly, and there was an anxious shade on his face.

It was plain that the confident words of the Sport had made an impression upon him.

That Blake was "playing in luck" seemed to be true, for he put two hundred dollars on the queen of diamonds and won three times in succession.

He was now eight hundred dollars ahead of the bank, and despite the veteran sport's boast that there wasn't any limit, the major began to grow nervous.

And Blake's big bets, too, seemed to keep the rest from playing; instead of trying their luck, they preferred to watch the Sport's game.

It had become a duel between the Fresh of 'Frisco and the bank.

"Make your game, gentlemen," said the major, but his voice had now become nervous and hoarse. It was as if by instinct he understood that ruin was at hand.

"Major, I am going for you now in good earnest," the Fresh declared. "I am going to try that darling queen of hearts again and to the tune of five hundred."

And the spectators almost held their breath as they beheld Blake calmly put a pile of chips, representing five hundred dollars, on the queen.

Not another bet was made.

"Come, gentlemen, ain't any the rest of you going to take a back at this deal?" the major inquired. "You surely are not going to let Mr. Blake frighten you all out!"

But not a man moved; they were all too much interested in Blake's big fight to take a hand in the game themselves.

"I reckon you might as well go ahead, major," the Sport remarked. "All the fun this time will be between us two."

The major was noted for being a man of ice when at the dealing-box, but on this occasion it was plain that he was rattled, and his hands were a little unsteady as he slipped the cards out.

The queen lost, and Major Pete drew a long breath of relief.

The Sport put a thousand on the queen.

And the second winning card out stuck the bank for that amount.

The major was deadly pale, and his "make your game, gentlemen," had a tremulous ring to it.

At this moment, Johnny Burke, who was Major Pete's partner, entered the apartment; one of the hangers-on of the saloon had hunted him up and told him of how things were going.

As he entered, the Fresh had just put a thousand dollars on the ace of diamonds.

A glance at the pile of chips before Blake told him how the battle had gone.

"Hold on, major!" he cried, "stop the game!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE POKER-PARTY.

ALL within the room, with the exception of the pards, Blake and Ringwood, started as though roused by an electric shock. They had become so absorbed by the great duel as not to notice aught else.

The major drew out his handkerchief and wiped off the drops of perspiration which had started on his forehead.

"What is the matter?" Blake asked. "Why do you interfere, Mr. Burke?"

"Because, Mr. Blake, as one of the partners in the concern I cannot allow the game to go on; without intending any offense, Mr. Blake, you are a heavy winner, I should judge from the display of chips before you. May I ask how much you are ahead of the game?"

Blake took a survey of his spoils.

"About thirteen hundred dollars, or thereabouts," the Sport answered.

"And you have a thousand bet?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Blake, you will have to draw that bet, for if you should win, the bank can't pay it."

"Hello! hello!" Blake cried. "Why, the major said there wasn't any limit."

"There is not, as a usual thing, but then when we gave out that statement we had no idea that any man was going to come and chuck thousand-dollar bets at us. Great Heavens, Mr. Blake, this isn't St. Louis, Chicago or 'Frisco! We haven't got ten or twenty thousand dollars at our back! I am really astonished, major, that you allowed Mr. Blake to go on when you discovered what kind of a game he wanted to play."

"Johnny, I really got into it before I knew it!" the old Sport exclaimed, a pathetic ring to his voice. "I am a pretty old hand, but Mr. Blake hyer rattled me, I lost my head, and, I swan, I didn't know exactly what I was doing."

"On a rough calculation, Mr. Blake, this hyer bank is only worth about three thousand dollars," Johnny Burke remarked. He was the financial man, and attended to the money department. "Now, if you are determined to bust us clean to smash—if nothing but our scalp will satisfy you, we will give you a game until you break us."

"I understand that you are on the war-path to-night. I have heard how you cleaned out Smiling Mickey's dive and Mexican Joe's shebang, and understand that it is your idea to

bu't every game in the town; but I hope, Mr. Blake, that you have too much sense to class our place with those dens? We run a squar' game hyer; everybody gets a squar' deal for their money, and when we lose we pay like gentlemen, and don't kick about it either. I don't want to take your thousand-dollar bet, for we cannot pay if we lost, and I don't believe in running a game of this kind on tick."

The bystanders had been a little afraid, when this conversation commenced, that it would end in a shooting-match, for Johnny Burke was known as a quiet yet determined fellow.

He had gone to work the right way, though, to appeal to the Fresh, and his sensible speech met the favor of that gentleman.

"Your explanation is perfectly satisfactory, Mr. Burke, and I take down my bet, and now, if you will have the kindness to cash these checks I will draw out." This to the man in charge of the money.

"I am not anxious to continue the game," the Sport continued. "When a man says that he has got enough, that satisfies me. I had to clean out Smiling Mickey and Mexican Joe, for both the scoundrels were on the fight when they found they were beaten, and they needed a lesson."

"I reckon you have given them a tussle that neither one will be apt to forget for many a long day," Burke observed. "You have been playing in big luck this evening, and I tell you, frankly, if I had been here when you commenced playing, I would have held you down to a small limit, mighty quick!"

"Glad you was'n't here then," the Fresh remarked with a laugh. "Well, I will be going now, but I will stop in and give you your revenge at some other time."

"All right; we will be glad to see you," and then Burke insisted that everybody should take a glass of wine in token of good fellowship, after which the parls departed.

"Now, then, comes the final tug-of-war—the poker party at the hotel," Blake remarked as he and Ringwood proceeded toward the Grand Hotel.

"So far I have done pretty well; I started with three hundred dollars, two hundred of my own and the hundred that I got from you, and now my cash capital amounts to about twenty-one hundred."

"A pretty decent night's work," Ringwood remarked, approvingly.

"Yes, my idea was to get together enough money to go into the game with General Clairborne and be able to hold my own in the betting. They say he is a plunger but I reckon that he don't get much above a two-thousand-dollar limit."

"I should say not! The man who bets any amount like that on a poker hand can be said to play a pretty big game."

"Well, a big game is what I am after," the Fresh replied. "A wise general always calculates to live upon the enemy's country as much as possible, and in this case I am going to try the same game. I need about six thousand dollars to pay the assessment on the stock, and as this General Clairborne is the man who put up that little job, it is my calculation to make him furnish the money."

"A capital idea!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "A neater way of getting back at him could not be devised, and it is safe to say that if you succeed in your little game, Clairborne will be as disgusted a man as has ever been known in this camp."

"It is the fortunes of war," Blake remarked. "And if the general has an objection to getting skinned he ought not to have gone into the game."

By this time the pair had arrived at the hotel, and, upon entering the saloon, were immediately greeted by the landlord.

"Wal, Mister Blake, I heer that you have jest been everlastingly socking it to the boys to-night!" Perkins exclaimed.

"Yes, we have been having a little fun," the Fresh replied. "The camp has been rather dull lately, and I thought I would sail in and see if I couldn't wake the boys up."

"I reckon you did it, Mister Blake!" the landlord exclaimed in a tone of conviction. "Why a feller was in hyer awhile ago who calculated you had got away with somewhere 'round ten thousand dollars to-night."

"Well, they say that a good story never loses anything in the telling," the Fresh remarked. "And this most certainly is an illustration of the truth of the adage. If the fellow had said hundreds in place of thousands he would have been a great deal nearer the mark."

"Wal, it 'pears to me that that wouldn't be a bad haul," the landlord observed.

"Oh, I am not complaining," the Fresh replied. "There isn't anything of the hog about me, though I must admit that I am rather sorry that there isn't two or three more games running in the town so that I could take a crack at them, for now that I have got my hand in I feel like keeping it up."

"They say that you have been playing in awful big luck," Perkins remarked.

"Well, as far as that goes, I reckon I have no reason to complain, but perhaps my luck was not as good as the other fellows' luck was bad."

"Say!" exclaimed the landlord, abruptly, as an idea occurred to him, "if you are hunting after some more fun I know where you kin git it."

"You do?"

"You bet!"

"Spit it out, then!" the Fresh exclaimed. "For I feel a good deal now like the ancient sharp who conquered all the world and then sat down and wept because there wasn't any more worlds to conquer."

The landlord, whose education was limited, had never before heard of this classic incident, and was considerably astonished by it.

"Wal, durn me if that ain't as queer a thing as I ever heerd on!" he exclaimed. "But to come back to what I was saying, thar's a poker party in the parlor, and I reckon that if you feel like taking a hand, you will be mighty welcome."

"There isn't anything that would suit me better," the Fresh replied. "And the bigger the game the better I like it. Suppose you suggest to the gentlemen that I would like to 'come in.' You can hint, you know, that I have been playing in big luck to-night, and that if anybody can succeed in skinning me of my ducats the haul would amount to something."

"Sart'in! I'll do it."

The landlord departed; the Fresh was not kept long in suspense, for Perkins returned in a few minutes with the message that the gentlemen would be glad to have Mr. Blake join them.

The two parls entered the parlor.

The poker party was a small one; around the table sat General Clairborne, Senor Del Santo, Francisco Gomes and Moses Cohen, the genial Jew, who kept the principal store in the camp.

Cohen was a young man, and although a close, hard-listed trader, was a genuine "high-roller" when the toils of the day were done.

"Hope I don't intrude, gentlemen," the Fresh remarked.

"Not at all!" the Tombstone man declared. "You are as welcome as the flowers in May!"

"Particularly if you have any money to lose," the Cuban observed, with a sarcastic smile.

Gomes had been a heavy winner, as the pile of money before him proved.

"Oh, I have got that, and if any gentleman here succeeds in relieving me of my surplus cash he will add a goodly amount to his store of wealth," Blake replied.

Room was made and the parls sat down.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BIG GAME.

"LET me see; it is my deal, I believe," the general observed.

"Yes, I dealt last," Cohen remarked, who sat next to the general, on his right.

On the general's left hand was the Mexican, then Ringwood, and next to him Blake, which completed the circuit of the table.

"Under what regulations are you playing?" the Fresh inquired as Clairborne proceeded to shuffle the cards, handling the pasteboards with all the ease and dexterity of a practice gambler, thus plainly showing that he had had a good deal of practice in this line.

"Well, we are just playing a little game for amusement only; just to pass away the time, you know," the general explained, pausing in his shuffling. "We are not professional gamblers—none of us can lay claim to be a sport, and so we are playing a two-bit ante."

"Yes, I see; just a little social game, to while the hours away," the Fresh observed.

"Exactly; that is the platform," Clairborne assented.

"A two-bit ante."

"Yes, just a quarter, to make the game interesting," the general remarked.

"Of course, without a small stake, the game would not be interesting," Blake observed.

"What is the limit?"

"There isn't any," Clairborne replied.

"No limit?"

"None; any gentleman is at liberty to back his hand with every dollar that he has in the world, if he feels so disposed," the Tombstone man declared.

"Well, I don't know as it will be safe for a small-fry player like myself to come in," Blake remarked, in an extremely modest way, "particularly when opposed to a big gun like yourself. If there isn't any limit, your money would be apt to beat my cards every time, no matter how they might be."

"Oh, no!" Clairborne exclaimed. "You have got a wrong impression about the matter, I see. We are not playing any cut-throat bluff game of freeze-out; we are gentlemen, not sharks, and every man is allowed a sight for his money be it much or little."

"Ah, yes, I see; well, that puts a different face on the matter," Blake admitted.

"Of course; we are only playing for amusement. The money is but to make the game interesting."

"I see."

Then the general proceeded to deal, Blake watching every movement of his hands in the closest manner, and yet being careful to veil his scrutiny so that it was not apparent.

As the reader, who has followed the fortunes

of Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, since the day when we first introduced him to the world of literature, knows, the Sport was a first-class card-sharp, probably as good a man with the painted pasteboards as the wild West has ever seen, and his object in watching General Clairborne so closely was to ascertain whether he was dealing fairly or not. Being an expert in this sort of thing, he felt certain he could detect whether the Tombstone man was trying to ring in a "cold deal" or not.

"He is dealing squarely," was the thought that was in the Fresh's mind. "If he isn't, then he is the smartest man to handle the pasteboards that I ever encountered, and I reckon that is saying a good deal."

After the cards were dealt, the players examined the hands.

All "stayed in," that is, each one considered that there was a chance, and went a dollar on it.

Then cards were called for.

"By the way, what game are we playing?" the Fresh asked, abruptly. "The regular one where four of a kind are good enough for a man to bet his life upon, or the bastard poker with a flush as the king-pin?"

"The old game," Clairborne replied.

"In that case, then, I reckon one card will do me," Blake remarked.

The rest looked at each other, for this seemed to indicate that the Fresh had an extremely good hand.

The cards being given out, all taking two or three apiece, the betting proceeded.

Santo took a careful survey of his hand and then announced:

"I think my cards are worth something this time," and then he added a little heap of coins to the "pot."

"Upon my word, senor, you are getting to be a regular plunger!" Gomes declared. "It will cost me ten dollars to come in now."

"That is the figure," the Mexican replied.

The Cuban meditated for a moment, then he shook his head.

"I don't think I can go it," he remarked. "This is the poorest hand I have had to-night, and I do not feel like risking even so small a sum as ten dollars upon it, so I will have to draw out."

"Me, too!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "My cards are not worth five dollars, let alone ten, so I am out too."

"Well, I don't really know about this matter," Blake observed, contemplating his cards with the air of a sage engaged in solving some weighty problem. "Maybe this hand of mine is not worth ten dollars, but I will be hanged if I like to be bluffed out of the game right at the jump-off, so to speak. Perhaps, too, the senor is trying to frighten us, and so I reckon I will have to go ten dollars on it this time," and then the Sport added to the pot.

"Well, I am in!" the general observed, with a brisk, business-like air. "And I will see the ten and go twenty better, and that is the kind of hairpin I am!"

"Oho!" the Mexican exclaimed. "My dear general, it is my impression that you are trying to scare us, eh, Mr. Blake?"

"I must admit that it looks like it!" the Sport replied.

"That game will not work with me, particularly when I hold an invincible hand as I do at present."

"Oh, oh!" the Fresh cried, "by Jinks! senor, it seems to me that you are doing a little in the scaring line yourself."

"Oh, no, I am merely talking good, sound, solid sense!" the Mexican declared. "And in order to convince you all that this is so, I will make good my words by deeds: I will see the general's bet and go him a hundred better," and the Mexican pushed a heap of money to the pile in the center of the table.

"Oh, well, now I am satisfied that you are just trying to scare me out of my boots!" the Fresh declared. "And I must admit that I am awfully frightened too, although I am doing my best not to show it, and I swear I would draw out of the game if I hadn't got interested in it, and kinder feel as if I would like to see the thing through, and as I feel that way I reckon I will see that hundred of yours, senor, and go you one thousand dollars better."

This announcement startled all of the players with the exception of Ringwood, who was used to the ways of the man from 'Frisco.

A grave look appeared on the face of the general as he watched Blake add his wealth to the center pile; then he surveyed his cards carefully and appeared to be deliberating how to act.

The thousand-dollar bet was the heaviest that had been made at the table that evening, and Clairborne was in a quandary.

Was the Sport "bluffing" or was his hand worth a deal of money?

Clairborne's cards were good, but not extra, four five spots, and he did not feel like risking a thousand dollars on them, so, after quite a pause, he announced, reluctantly, that he was out of the game.

"Well, senor, that narrows the thing down to you and I," Blake remarked. "And I suppose you will skin me, for I have an idea from the

way you started in that you have a powerful big hand."

The Mexican shook his head, and there was a serious look on his face.

He did hold good cards, four three spots, but from the reckless way in which the Fresh had bet he had the impression that his opponent's hand must be far better than his own.

The senior had been playing in bad luck all the evening and he hesitated now to risk a thousand, for it was his impression that he stood no chance to win.

Perceiving that he hesitated Blake took occasion to remark:

"It will only cost you a thousand to see just how strong a hand I have, and if your cards are better than mine—and I shouldn't be surprised if they are—it will not cost you a cent, for then you will scoop in the pile and for a two bit ante game it is a pretty fair pot."

All eyes were now fixed upon the face of the Mexican. The rest were anxious to see if he dared to risk the money.

General Clairborne was particularly interested for it was galling in the extreme to him for the Sport to come into the game and make a big haul right at the start.

Del Santo was sorely tempted to put up the money, but the longer he looked at his four trays, the more diminutive they appeared, and the greater seemed the risk of betting any such sum as a thousand dollars on them.

So, after a long pause, the Mexican drew his cards together and cast them upon the pack.

"The money is yours, Mr. Blake. I am out!" he exclaimed.

"Well, now, you really astonish me!" the Sport remarked, assuming an air of profound amazement. "I never expected to capture this boodle," and he drew the money to him as he spoke, at the same time casting his cards, face upward, carelessly upon the table; and all he had in his hand were three ten-spots.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A BIGGER GAME STILL.

THE amazement of the players as they looked upon the three tens can better be imagined than described.

Both the general and the Mexican were astounded.

Either one could have beaten the Fresh if they had had courage to bet, and a gleam of anger appeared in their eyes.

It was not pleasant to be defeated in this way. "It is your deal, Del Santo," Clairborne remarked.

The Tombstone man tried to appear indifferent and careless, but his annoyance was plainly betrayed by both his face and his voice.

"Ah, yes, so it is," the Mexican replied, and then he gathered up the cards.

Although fully as angry at the Sport's victory as Clairborne, yet Del Santo had more command over himself, and did not betray his rage so openly.

The Mexican shuffled the cards, and the Fresh watched his movements as intently as he had those of the general, although, as before, he managed the scrutiny so that no one suspected that he was paying any particular attention.

Apparently he was busy arranging the money which he had won in neat little piles.

Del Santo did not handle the cards with the deftness that the general had displayed, and the Fresh soon came to the conclusion that there wasn't any danger of Del Santo's trying to ring in a cold deal.

"I do not doubt that the Mexican would like to do it well enough," was the thought which came to the Sport, "but he is not able; he is not skillful enough to try any trick of that kind, for a man like myself, who is a judge of that sort of thing can see that his fingers are not well trained enough to make a 'pass' or execute any trick of the kind."

The cards were dealt, the two-bit piece duly deposited in the "pot," and then the players proceeded to examine their hands.

It was Gomes who set the ball rolling this time.

"My hand isn't worth much," he remarked, "but I think I will chip in twenty-five dollars so as to make the game interesting."

This announcement caused the others to open their eyes.

"Well, I reckon you are trying to scare us all out of our boots!" the general exclaimed. "Twenty-five dollars is a pretty good starter."

"Yes, it costs a man something to come in this time," Dave Ringwood remarked. "I have not got much in my hand myself, but I will be hanged if I do not go fifty dollars on it, just for luck!" And as he spoke Ringwood added that amount to the pot.

"Fifty dollars is a heap of money, John," the Fresh observed, sorting out that amount from his pile and pushing it to join the rest in the middle of the table.

"This sort of thing comes high, but we must go it if we bust."

"Well, gentlemen, it seems to me dot ish pig play!" Cohen suggested. "But I am in mid you all the same."

And away went his fifty dollars to the center.

"I reckon we will have enough up this time

to make it interesting," Clairborne observed, as he added his fifty to the pot.

"How many cards, gentlemen?" De Santo asked.

"One," said Gomes.

"Two," was Ringwood's request.

"None at all, thank you," responded the Fresh.

The rest knitted their eyebrows and exchanged significant looks.

The same thought was in the minds of about all of them.

Was the Sport going to try the same game this time which he had worked so successfully before?

It did not seem hardly possible that he would have the impudence to try to bluff them again and win the pot on a hand which would not take it, if the bluff was met; still from the way he began it looked as if Blake had calculated that the game could be worked again as it had been so successful on the first occasion.

"None for you?" Del Santo queried.

"No, sir, I stand pat."

Now this announcement could only be construed in two ways: first, that the Sport had a hand so good that he did not believe it could be bettered—and if that was so, he had had the luck to catch cards which rarely fell to a player more than once in a thousand times, or else he was trying a bluff game, pure and simple.

The general turned the matter over in his mind.

"Either he is going to play the same bluff game that won the money before, or else he has a hand which cannot be beaten and which no additional cards would strengthen. There is only one hand which answers to that description—four aces. If he held four kings and some other card, he most certainly would ask for one card, for that one might be an ace, which would render his hand certain to win. True, he may hold four kings and an ace; that would be an invincible hand, but the odds are about a million to one that he does not hold those five cards."

"Upon the whole it is pretty safe to come to the conclusion that he is trying the same bluff which worked before."

We have detailed the general's arguing at length, for the conclusion to which he arrived was the one that was in the minds of all, with the exception of Dave Ringwood.

He being well acquainted with the Fresh's way of playing, did not believe he was going to try to capture the pot by the sheer game of bluff, and thought he had some other scheme in his mind.

Cohen took three cards and the general two, and Del Santo three.

And now with earnest faces the players surveyed their hands.

That the Cuban was in the mood for heavy play was evident, for after studying his hand for a few moments, he took five hundred dollars from his pile, which about exhausted it, and pushed them to join the wealth in the center of the table.

"My hand is worth fully five hundred dollars according to my calculation," Gomes observed.

"Oh, see here, this is rough on the boys!" Dave Ringwood exclaimed. "My hand is worth five hundred if yours is, and I will have to draw out," and he bunched his cards as he finished speaking and threw them on the pack.

"Well, Ringwood, I must say I am really astonished at you; I thought you had more sand than that!" Blake remarked in a tone of mild reproach. "What is five hundred dollars? Nothing at all, a mere flea-bite if your hand amounts to anything at all."

"Now, my cards might not be considered good enough for a man to risk his life upon, although I have known men to risk their lives for mighty little, yet I would not hesitate to plank down five hundred ducats on it, and fifteen hundred on top of that, making two thousand in all," and, suiting the action to the word, the Fresh placed two thousand dollars on the pile.

"There," he added, "that makes a nice little sum to fight for. The man who captures that wealth will be able to boast of the pot."

"Mine goodness, Mister Blake, you think dot we go mit National Banks or gold-mines mid our pockets?" exclaimed Cohen in a tone of great discontent. He had succeeded in capturing "two pair," and had fondly cherished a hope that he might be able to make something out of such a hand, but this heavy betting scared him off.

"Why, old fellow, you don't mean to say that this is too much for you?" Blake exclaimed. "I thought you were a big better."

"Mine goodness! I am not mit der two thousand-dollar class!" the other replied.

"You are going to make a fight for the wealth then?" the Sport asked.

"No, sir, I am out!" and with an air of great disgust the Jew threw his cards on the pack.

Now it was the general's turn.

Clairborne had an extra good hand and while the conversation had been going on he had studied his cards carefully.

He had four nines and a jack, a hand upon

which according to poker calculations a man was justified in betting a big sum, but if the Tombstone lawyer had not seen Blake capture the preceding pot by sheer audacity he would not have been apt to stand his ground after the Sport's bet of two thousand.

As it was though he was urged on by the thought that Blake was only bluffing now just as he had done before.

All eyes were fixed on the general.

He produced a well-filled pocketbook and taking from it bills to the amount of two thousand dollars, shoved them to the center of the table.

"I am in!" he announced.

Del Santo hesitated for a moment and then, encouraged by the general's action, he added two thousand dollars to the pot.

"Oho! this is getting interesting!" Blake declared.

Gomes did not hesitate but promptly put up his two thousand.

"I call you!" the Cuban exclaimed.

Then there was a display of cards.

It was odd, but all of the players had four of a kind.

Clairborne displayed four nines, Gomes exhibited four sevens, and Del Santo four two spots and the Fresh had four tens and an ace.

He had not been bluffing this time, but had captured the pot all the same.

The disgust of the unsuccessful players was great.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GENERAL PLUNGES DEEPLY.

THERE was a dead silence around the table for a few moments, the players bending forward and anxiously examining the hands of cards.

General Clairborne was the first to break the silence.

"You will excuse my speaking, but, really, Mr. Blake, you have the queerest way of playing poker that I think I ever saw."

"Maybe so, but you must allow me to rise to remark that I get there all the same," the Sport replied, with an air of perfect contentment, and as he spoke he drew the pile of money which was in the center of the table to his side.

"Never in all my life did I ever see such an odd way to play!" Del Santo declared, decidedly annoyed by the success which had crowned the efforts of the Fresh.

"Well, I suppose my game is a rather strange one," the Fresh replied, in a reflective way.

"It has been criticised before, but as it seems to pan out pretty well you can hardly blame me for sticking to it."

"Possibly sometimes it may work well, but, to my thinking, it would not do so as a rule," the Mexican observed. "Now take this last play of yours; if you had had an invincible hand—one that could not be beaten—you could not have bet more boldly."

"The hand was good for the money, wasn't it?" the Fresh demanded. "It took the pot—what more do you want?"

"Well, that is the game, of course," the general admitted.

"Yes, there is an old saying that all roads lead to Rome, so what matters what road you take so long as you arrive at the point for which you are bound?" Blake observed.

"Oh, I suppose it does not make much difference," the Mexican remarked.

Gomes took up the cards.

"It is my deal, I believe," he said.

"Yes, go ahead and see if you can't give us all some good cards this time!" Clairborne exclaimed. "We have been betting good money, but none of us have had the cards to back up such betting."

At this point Cohen consulted his watch.

"So late!" he cried. Well, well, gentlemen, you will have to excuse me, for I have to be up early mit der morning."

"Certainly, of course," Clairborne remarked, taking it upon himself to reply for the rest.

The Jew departed.

"Our friend has been pretty hard hit to-night, Clairborne continued, "I don't think he has won a stake the whole evening."

"And I have had no better luck!" the Mexican grumbled. "The cards have run for me as if Satan himself was in them!"

"Very likely there is some truth in that," the Fresh remarked. "The church folks declare that cards are Satan's picture books."

By this time Gomes had finished shuffling and proceeded to deal.

This round was devoid of incident. No one of the players was lucky enough to catch cards of any importance and so the betting was not exciting.

The pot only amounted to about twenty dollars and was captured by Dave Ringwood.

"Now, Dave, old fellow it is your turn to do something for your country and see if you cannot deal us some cards which will make our hair stand on end," the Fresh remarked.

"I will do the best I can for you," Ringwood replied.

But as it happened this was another tame round. None of the players had hands of sufficient importance to warrant heavy betting and so the pot was only some ten dollars; the Mexican was the lucky man.

"There, you have had one little streak of luck," Blake observed, as he took up the cards and began to shuffle them.

"Oh, what use to win a paltry ten dollars?" Del Santo exclaimed in contempt.

"Ah, you should not turn up your nose at small things," Blake advised, shuffling the cards vigorously as he spoke, handling the pasteboards in a manner which plainly betrayed that he was a master hand at that sort of business. "I always go on the old motto, the smallest favors thankfully received, and larger ones in proportion. Doesn't that strike you as being about the right way to look at the matter, general?"

"Well, I don't know; I cannot say that I care much for small gains!" Clairborne replied.

"What is that saying the Scotch have of many a mickle makes a muckle, or something of that kind?" the Fresh remarked, offering the cards to Dave Ringwood to be "cut" at this point.

Now Ringwood was a veteran sport, and he saw the moment that Blake offered the cards to him that the "cut" was a forced one; that is, the pack was offered in such a way that a man who was not up to the trick would be almost certain to cut the cards in one particular place.

And now he guessed why the Fresh had been so talkative during his shuffling. He was using the old juggler's device of talking while he was getting ready for a trick; by thus engaging the attention of the company he kept them from noticing what he was about.

If the Fresh had not been his pard Ringwood would have upset the little game by cutting in a different place, but as it was he performed the operation exactly as Blake wished.

"Now we will go for it!" the Fresh exclaimed after the cut was over.

Then there was a quick movement of Blake's hands, so quick that no one noticed it, and even Ringwood, who was watching for the operation to be performed, would not have been certain that it had taken place, had he not been on the lookout for it.

Blake had made a "pass."

To explain this the reader must remember that when a pack of cards are "cut," preparatory to the deal, the top half is placed under the lower half; the idea of cutting is to prevent the dealer from getting certain cards in a particular place. He may be able by dextrous shuffling to get important cards where he wants them, but the cut is supposed to destroy this arrangement.

To make a pass then, is, after the cut is over, for the dealer to reverse the order of the two halves, returning the top to its original place, so that the cut is set at naught.

It hardly seems possible that such a movement could be performed right before the eyes of a score of players without any of them being able to detect it, yet it can be done by a man expert in handling cards, just as the juggler executes tricks before a whole room full of people, without any of them being able to detect how the thing is done.

It is easily explained though: the hands are quicker than the eyes.

By means of the pass the Fresh had the cards exactly as they were before the cut was made. He was one of the showy shufflers, who forced one half of the pack into the other with a snap, and by this and similar tricks, disguised the fact that he was arranging the cards to suit himself.

Blake's command of the cards was really marvelous, and they seemed to fairly fly from his hands as he dealt.

The hands being out, the examination began.

Of course in the game of poker it is of the highest consequence for the player to keep a guard over his features so that his face will not betray whether the cards he holds are good or bad; to wear a mask in fact; yet, no matter how careful a man may be in regard to this, the expression of the eyes will often reveal the truth, for there is hardly one man out of a thousand who is able to control his eyes.

And the Fresh noticed that there was a gleam of satisfaction in the eyes of Clairborne, the Mexican, and Gomes, which plainly indicated that they held good cards.

"Well, I reckon I will chip in a hundred this time just to make it interesting," Clairborne remarked.

"Two hundred for me!" the Mexican exclaimed, promptly.

"The same for me!" Gomes cried.

"Oh, well, I will draw out for I haven't a blessed thing in my hand!" Dave Ringwood remarked with a disgusted air, bunching his cards and throwing them into the center of the table.

"Well, I haven't got much to brag on, but I will be hanged if I am going to be scared out right at the beginning!" the Fresh declared. "So I will go two hundred ducats!"

And after the money was put up, he inquired:

"Now, gentlemen, how many cards?"

The general took two, Del Santo two and Gomes one.

"Well, I reckon I want about one," the Fresh remarked.

This made the others look a little serious for it seemed to imply that Blake had a strong hand,

but then when they came to think of how skillfully he had bluffed them out of the pot on a hand hardly worth risking ten dollars upon they concluded that it was not an easy matter to predict from Blake's play what kind of a hand he had.

The general studied his cards for a few moments, then he went down into his pocketbook and brought out five thousand dollars which he added to the center pile.

"There, I think my hand is worth that much money!" he declared.

This action astonished the rest.

Del Santo closely scrutinized his cards for a few moments. It was apparent that the largeness of the general's bet rather bothered him. Then he shook his head, his face grew earnest and he produced a small check-book.

"I haven't cash enough to meet the general's bet," he remarked, "but I presume you will not object to a personal check."

"Certainly not!" Blake declared.

"I can bear witness that Mr. Del Santo is good for any amount to which he may be willing to put his signature," the general observed.

The Mexican was provided with a fountain pen so he was able to fill out the check for five thousand dollars without any trouble.

Then came Gomes's turn.

"Well, gentlemen, I would really like to chip in five thousand dollars' worth, for I think my hand is worth it," the Cuban remarked, "but I haven't either the cash or check-book, although I am good for the amount."

"As far as I am concerned I should be quite satisfied with your I. O. U.," Blake hastened to say.

"There isn't any objection to that as far as I can see," the general added.

"All right," Gomes said, and then borrowing the Mexican's pen, he made out an I. O. U. for five thousand dollars and added it to the pot.

"I am in five thousand dollars, and two thousand on top of that," Blake remarked. "If it is your game to bluff me with big bets it will not work, for I am right up to you every time!"

The prompt response of the Sport rather astonished the general, and he immediately came to the conclusion that the Sport was trying his bluff game again.

"That is what I like to see. I admire a man who stands up to the rack and takes his gruel like a man," the general commented. "But I want to give you fair warning, gentlemen, that I have a magnificent hand, and I am going to back it up like a major, but I will have to fall back on my I. O. U."

"Certainly, that is all right," Blake remarked.

"And I am going to make the thing interesting, too!" Clairborne declared. "I will see your two thousand and go you ten thousand better. Give me the pen, please."

Then the general filled out the I. O. U. and added it to the heap.

"That settles me!" Del Santo exclaimed, flinging his cards upon the pack in an angry way.

"I am out too!" Gomes declared, following the example of the other.

"Well, I am going to have a show for my money!" Blake remarked. "So here is my I. O. U. for fifteen thousand ducats," and he made out the paper.

The general looked serious, and the others watched the scene with a deal of interest. This was a little ahead of anything of the kind that they had seen.

"I say, Blake, you must excuse the question, but if you lose will you be able to meet your I. O. U. for so large a sum?" Clairborne asked.

It was plain that the general was getting nervous, and the rest suspected that he regretted going into the matter so deeply.

"Now see, general, it is hardly fair to put that question, you know, when no objection was made to the I. O. U. of yourself and Mr. Gomes," the Fresh remarked. "But you need not worry about the matter. I am good for every dollar to which I put my name. I saw your ten thousand and went you five better, and if you have faith enough in your hand to keep on, I am ready to meet you, dollar for dollar!"

This was a bold declaration, and it had its effect upon Clairborne.

He saw that he could not hope to bluff the Sport, and the unwelcome thought was in his mind that it was possible Blake had an invincible hand.

"No, I reckon I am in about deep enough now, and I am no hog. I don't want to skin you clean down to your bones," the general remarked. "Here is my I. O. U. for five thousand."

He filled out the paper, added it to the pot and then said:

"I call you; what have you got?"

"Four kings are high," Blake replied, displaying the cards.

The general gazed upon the painted pasteboards for a moment, a deep, dark frown wrinkling his brows, then, with a muttered exclamation, he bunched his cards in his hand and threw them upon the pack.

"It is good, the pot is yours!" he cried, in a dogged, angry way.

It was no wonder that the players had been lured on to bet heavily; every man, with the exception of Dave Ringwood, held a magnificent hand. Clairborne held four queens and an ace, so that only the hand which Blake held could beat him, and the others had cards almost as good.

At this point the landlord made his appearance.

"I don't want to hurry you, gentlemen, but are you aware that it is after two o'clock?" he asked.

None of the players had taken any account of the flight of time, so interested had they been in the game.

"Ah, is that so?" the general exclaimed.

"Well, I reckon it is about time to quit," and he rose from the table. The others followed his example.

"I stand ready to give you, gentlemen, your revenge at any time," Blake announced.

The rest bowed in acknowledgment, but none of them seemed disposed to accept the offer.

Then they all went out into the night and wended their ways to their homes.

The most exciting poker game that the camp of Slide-Out had ever seen was now a matter of history.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BLAKE'S DETERMINATION.

THE five went on together until they came to where the Chinese trail split off, and then the two pards parted from the rest and went on up the lonely way which led to the Wildcat Mine. After they had got well out of earshot of the others—well up in the foot-hills—the pair fell into conversation.

"I don't want to flatter you, Blake," Dave Ringwood remarked, "but I must say that the way you worked this little business-to-night was a leetle ahead of anything of the kind that I ever saw, and yet I have witnessed some pretty scientific games in my time."

"Well, Dave, I reckoned you were old sport enough to see how I worked the trick," Blake remarked, with a laugh.

"Well, no, I can't say that—I cannot, with truth, say that I saw how you worked it, for you did the trick so neatly that I would defy anybody to catch you at it, but I suspected the game."

"Particularly, I suppose, when you saw how it came out."

"Yes, but I anticipated the result."

"Well, morally, I suppose I took an advantage of these men—my conduct cannot be justified," the Fresh remarked, reflectively. "All I can plead, in excuse is, that it was a case of dog eat dog; all of them are my bitter enemies, and if they could get a chance to pick me clean to the bone, there is not one of the three who would not go a long way out of his road to improve the chance."

"To my thinking there is no doubt about that!" Dave Ringwood asserted.

"These two lawyers got possession of the Red Dragon Mine by foul means," Blake remarked. "When De Belleville got behind, they came down on him like a pack of wolves, and did not give the man any chance for his life. The Frenchman was a thorough scoundrel, of course, but that did not make any difference to them; if he had been as honest and worthy a man as ever walked the earth, it would have been all the same to these lawyers."

"The code of morals which rules the world is a strange one, for a deed of this sort is not counted a crime, it is not thieving or robbery, but financiering; the men who make colossal fortunes by wrecking railroads, mines, and similar pieces of knavery, are not regarded as rascals, but held up as examples of successful business men; they are admired and honored while they live, and their virtues are blazed to the world upon their tombstones after they are dead."

"I say, Blake, you wouldn't make a bad lecturer!" Dave Ringwood observed, laughing.

"Well, I don't know about that," the other replied, with a dubious shake of the head. "I should be mighty apt to tell the truth, and the world at large does not always like truth, as many a philosopher has found to his cost since the days of old, when the classic sharps used to make it warm for the men who dared to assert that things were different from what they were supposed to be."

"That is true enough, the career of the reformer has always been a stormy one."

"Yes, more kicks than half-pence."

"But I say, to come back to our mutton, you have been a heavy winner to-night, but do you think you will be able to realize on these bits of paper that you hold?"

"That is funny!" Blake exclaimed. "I have just been thinking about that matter too! I have got the general in for seventeen thousand, the Mexican and Gomes for five thousand apiece."

"Big sums!" Dave Ringwood remarked with a warning shake of the head. "It is one thing to bet big money like that during the excitement produced by the game, and quite another to sit down the day after, when the excitement

is all gone, and make arrangements to raise the money to pay off the claim."

"I can see that you have been there," Blake observed. "You know what it is to have a man fairly crazy to have you play with him at night, and then kick like a mule when called upon the next morning to pay over the money, which he lost on tick."

"Yes, you are right; I have been there."

"Well, in the 'effete East' a gambling debt cannot be collected by law if the loser declines to pay; it is a debt on honor purely, and if the man hasn't any honor, the money cannot be collected, but in the great and glorious West the case is different. Here a gambling debt does amount to something and if I accept a man's I. O. U. and he refuses to make the paper good when he is amply able to do so, then it becomes a personal matter, and he either pays or fights."

"Yes, I understand, and that is the game you propose to try on these men?"

"Exactly. I shall wait on them to-morrow, and if they are not prepared to come to a satisfactory arrangement with me then there will be music in the air."

And from Blake's manner it was plain that this was no idle threat.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BROUGHT TO BOOK.

ABOUT eight o'clock on the following morning Blake, accompanied by Dave Ringwood, started to interview the three debtors.

"I am a firm believer in taking time by the forelock, and making hay while the sun shines," the Fresh observed. "And in this case I want to proceed quickly. I want to catch these fellows before they have time to arrange a scheme to beat me."

"That is a good idea," Dave Ringwood remarked. "And the chances are that you will make a raise."

"Yes, I think so."

The pards chatted upon the subject until they reached the main road and at the junction they encountered Gomes.

"Ah, you are the very man I wanted to see!" the Cuban exclaimed.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I want to settle my little account with you, for I have made up my mind to leave this part of the country."

"This is a sudden determination of yours," the Sport observed.

"Yes; I only arrived at it this morning, but I have been contemplating such a move for some time. I have grown weary of this country, and have made up my mind to return to Cuba; then, too, I have a mission of vengeance which demands my attention now," Gomes declared, his face growing dark with rage as he spoke.

"Is it possible?" Blake asked, anticipating from the looks of the other that some outward event had occurred.

"Yes; you knew my countryman, Sanches?"

The pards nodded assent.

"He is a distant relative, and I have always befriended him. He has been more or less wild ever since boyhood, but as he promised me that he would turn over a new leaf I brought him to this country, advanced money to meet his wants and got him a good situation in the Red Dragon Mine."

"Well, from what I have seen of him I should fancy that his reformation did not amount to much," Blake remarked, "for he has been going at a pretty fast pace ever since I knew him."

"It is true, the scoundrel did not keep his word, but has been worse than that ever since he came to this camp. He became involved in a disgraceful row last night, nearly murdered one of his associates and now has fled, first breaking open my trunk and stealing all the money he could lay his hands upon."

"Well, that was black ingratitude!" the Fresh declared.

"Yes, and I have determined to pursue the scoundrel, and when I once leave this camp I do not think I shall ever return to it, and as I am anxious to get away as soon as possible, I want to settle with you," the Cuban declared. "I have not the ready money to meet my I. O. U., but I suppose you will not mind taking five thousand dollars worth of the Red Dragon stock. It is just the same as cash."

"Certainly; that will be perfectly satisfactory," the Sport replied. "By the way, how much Red Dragon stock do you hold?"

"Ten thousand dollars' worth."

"I will take the whole of it off your hands if you care to part with it," the Fresh remarked.

"Yes, I shall be glad to do so, for I am anxious to wash my hands of the whole affair. If you will come up to the mine I will make the transfer and we can settle the business in a few minutes."

The Fresh responded that he would be glad to do so, and the three went at once to the Red Dragon works.

The affair was soon arranged.

"Inside of ten minutes I will be off!" the Cuban announced. "And I shall be glad when I shake the dust of this valley from my feet. There has been bad feeling between us, Mr. Blake, but that is all over now. Whether you

have won the prize or not, it is certain that I have lost it, and the quicker I get away the better."

Gomes was as good as his word, for as soon as his horse was brought he vaulted into the saddle and rode off.

He had done with the camp of Slide-Out.

"He is a pretty decent fellow," the Fresh remarked to Dave Ringwood as he watched the Cuban ride down the trail.

"Yes, he is not bad as men go."

"Now that this bit of business is settled so nicely, let's see what we can do with the others," and as he spoke, Blake started for the Red Dragon office.

"I reckon you will not find the others disposed to settle the affair so quickly," Dave Ringwood remarked.

"That is about what I think, too, and I suppose I will have to put the screws on, and you can depend upon it that I shall not hesitate," Blake replied.

The pards found General Clairborne and the Mexican, Del Santo, in the apartment when they entered, and both looked rather surprised when they saw the Sport.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said Blake, helping himself to a chair without any ceremony, an example which Dave Ringwood followed.

"Good-morning," responded the others, somewhat coldly.

"I have come to see if we couldn't close up the little business which we got into last night," Blake remarked.

"Close it up?" said Clairborne in a tone of question.

"Yes, I hold your I. O. U. for seventeen thousand dollars, and this gentleman's check for five thousand; now the idea has come to me that it would be best to have the matter settled, and, of course, gentlemen like yourself, men of wealth and standing, do not care to see your paper out when you can easily redeem it."

"Yes, but it is not possible for me to take it up, just at present," Clairborne remarked.

"Although seventeen thousand dollars is a pretty large sum, yet if I were in Tombstone, I could give you your money in ten minutes; but I have no banker here, of course, and you must be aware that it is not probable that I carry such an amount as that around with me."

"My own situation exactly," the Mexican remarked.

"Ah, gentlemen, there is an old saying that where there is a will there is a way," the Sport rejoined. "And if you care to settle the matter now, I can easily explain how it can be done."

"Go ahead!" Clairborne exclaimed, "but I doubt if you will be able to do it."

"Oh, the thing is as easy as rolling off a log!" Blake declared. "And you can settle up in five minutes if you want to do so."

"How?" the general demanded.

"You know I am one of the shareholders in this Red Dragon property?"

"Yes, to an extremely limited extent," Clairborne replied, with a clearly perceptible sneer.

"That is true, but I hope it will not be so much longer," Blake remarked, smiling in the most agreeable manner in the face of the other.

It was the old story, the hand of iron in the glove of silk.

There was nothing in Blake's manner to denote that he was preparing to put the screws on in a way the others would despise.

"The thing I am going to propose will fix that all right," the Fresh continued. "You can take your I. O. U., general, and your check, Mr. Del Santo, by transferring to me the value in Red Dragon shares. The two together call for twenty-two thousand dollars' worth, and when I stand credited on the books for that amount, there isn't anybody but will admit that my interest is not a limited one."

The lawyers exchanged glances; this proposal took them completely by surprise, for it was entirely unexpected; but neither one was disposed to agree to it, and this determination was apparent on their faces.

"I don't think we care to go into this arrangement," the general said, after a pause.

"Better take a little time to think the matter over," Blake urged. "Don't be hasty in answering."

"I don't think, sir, that you would get any different answer out of us if we deliberated the matter for a week!" Clairborne declared in rather an ugly way.

"Well, I am sorry for that, for I hate to have any trouble," the Fresh remarked. "But I want these bits of paper turned into money, and you ought not to blame me for taking the quickest possible way to bring about that result."

"I should really like to know how you propose to set about it?" the general exclaimed, angrily.

"Oh, the thing is simple enough. I shall attack your interests in this property."

"Put on an attachment!" cried Clairborne, annoyed. "Well, I don't really see how you can do that, for there are no courts handy."

"Oh, yes, there is!" Blake rejoined. "The court I propose to call on for aid is presided over by Judge Lynch, and when that judge takes a hand in the game, you can bet your life

that there will be no foolishness about the matter. I have plenty of money at my back, and money counts in Judge Lynch's court just the same as in any other. I shall raise a force, seize this Red Dragon property, and hold on to it until I get my twenty-two thousand dollars."

"Surely, you will not dare to make such a move as that?" cried the general, aghast.

"You can bet every dollar that you have in the world that I will!" the Fresh cried. "And I give you fair warning, too, that if you attempt to get in the way of the procession, you will be fixed for planting so quickly that it will be certain to make your head swim!"

Never were there two men more completely taken by surprise, and the more they meditated over the matter, the worse it appeared to them.

Finally the general begged that they might have a few minutes to consult in regard to the matter in private.

"Certainly; take all the time you want in reason," was Blake's reply.

The two retired to the inner room, and there discussed the affair.

But they were in a trap, and there was no escape, as far as they could see, and so, after ten minutes' debate, they returned, and Clairborne announced that they had decided to transfer the stock.

This operation was soon performed.

"That makes two hundred and twenty-one shares," the Fresh remarked. "Quite a showing, and add a hundred more shares to that, makes me interested in the Red Dragon property to the tune of thirty-two thousand one hundred dollars."

"How do you make that out?" the general continued, in amazement, while the Mexican stared in wonder.

"Oh, I forgot to mention that I have come in possession of all Mr. Gomes's interest, ten thousand shares, and he has left Slide-Out for good," Blake replied.

This was an astonishing bit of information for the two.

"Thirty-two thousand dollars' worth of stock for me, say, and thirty thousand dollars' worth of stock for Miss Catalina Blanco; sixty-two thousand dollars' worth out of one hundred thousand. Gentlemen, I reckon your humble servant to command will run this mine hereafter."

The lawyers' faces grew blank. They had been caught in a snare from which there was no escape, and it was totally unexpected, too.

"I reckon, General Clairborne, you had better resign as president in my favor, and, Senor Del Santo, my friend here, Dave Ringwood, will relieve you of the treasurership. No use for you to kick, you know. I have won the fight, and you might as well accept the situation with a good grace."

This was true, and after a few minutes' reflection upon the matter the two complied with the Fresh's request.

The struggle was over and Blake had won a most complete victory.

The lawyers were wise enough to put a good face on the matter, and they and the Sport parted apparently the best of friends, but in their hearts the discomfited pair were mad with rage, and after the Sport was gone they fell into an earnest consultation, trying with all their powers to devise some scheme by means of which they could be avenged.

It was not in the nature of two such men as General Clairborne, with his hot Southern blood, and Estervan Del Santo, the wily and unscrupulous lawyer, to submit to a defeat without doing all in their power to damage the successful enemy.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ANOTHER SCHEME.

"UPON my word, I don't think I was ever so completely beaten at any game in my life!" the Mexican declared.

"That is a fact!" Clairborne admitted. "And what makes the matter more disgusting, it really seemed as if we had the matter so arranged that we could not possibly lose."

"True; there is no disputing that this Blake has played his cards with marvelous skill."

"Yes, yes, the fellow is a genius!"

"A great genius!"

"And we made the mistake of underrating him," the general asserted. "And there is where we were extremely foolish. If we had recognized at the beginning that we had an unscrupulous and dangerous foe to fight we might have made a better showing in this contest."

"It was that accursed game of cards last night!" the Mexican exclaimed, with a groan. "If we had not allowed the man to win the enormous sums of money that he did from us, he would not have been in a condition to dictate terms."

"That is as true as anything you ever said in your life," the general responded. "I can see now that we were led into a trap. It was all a deep-laid scheme on the part of this fellow to get at our wealth. Of course, we were not wise to risk so heavily as we did, but then how was it possible for us to foresee that this man was an invincible player?"

"True, very true," the Mexican remarked,

with a deep sigh. "I have always flattered myself that I was an extra good poker-player."

"And you are!" the general asserted. "There is not any doubt about it! I have watched your game twenty times—ay, fifty, I think, and I am sure that I never met a man who played with more judgment than you do, or who understands the value of cards any better."

"I have always been looked upon as being a dangerous man at cards," the Mexican remarked, proudly.

"And with reason!"

"You, too, general, you have always been considered to be a fine player, and a lucky one."

"Yes, that is so, and luck counts for a great deal at poker."

"Undoubtedly."

"If I had not been so confident of my skill, and so certain that luck would be upon my side, I would not have plunged so deeply."

Then a sudden thought came to the Mexican, and he at once gave it utterance.

"Hark ye, general, do you believe that it can be possible that this Blake is a sharper?"

"A card sharp, you mean?"

"Yes."

"You are speculating in regard to the fairness of the game?"

"I am."

The general reflected upon the matter for a few moments.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "I will admit that the thought occurred to me at the time, when Blake won so largely, if he was not 'helping fortune,' as the French say, 'by holding good hands,' I watched his game narrowly, but was not able to detect anything out of the way."

"Ah, yes, I watched him too."

"You did?"

"Oh, yes, I always make it a rule to watch the game closely, no matter with whom I play."

"It is not a bad idea," the general asserted.

"And, like you, I could not discover anything amiss," the Mexican said.

"No, that is true; he certainly seemed to play fair. His game was a bold one, and novel in the extreme, and, to my thinking, he seemed to owe as much to the way he played his hand as to the cards he held."

"Yes, it seemed so to me."

"Of course it may be that he is an extra good card sharp," the general remarked, after thinking over the matter for a moment.

"It is possible."

"I have heard of such fellows, and I do not doubt that they exist, although I never happened to meet with one; men who could handle cards with all the skill of a slight-of-hand performer; who could shuffle the pack in the most thorough and apparently honest manner, have it cut by a party who was not in league with him, an antagonist, on the watch to detect fraud, and yet be able to deal six or eight hands and know exactly what cards were in each hand."

"Yes, yes, I have heard such tales, but I can hardly believe that they can be true," the Mexican remarked.

"Oh, there is no doubt that there are card-players who are able to perform such feats—of course, only one man among ten thousand players."

"And now that I come to think of it, this Blake did deal the hands at the time when he made his grand coup!" the Mexican exclaimed, his face dark with anger.

"My dear fellow, I guess that we were taken in and done for, although I had no suspicion of it at the time."

"It is monstrous!" Del Santo exclaimed, jumping to his feet, and pacing up and down the room in a great rage.

Clairborne laughed.

"Well, my dear Del Santo, as long as the money is lost, what difference does it make whether he won it by fair means or foul, so long as he was smart enough to work the trick so we were not able to detect that we were being cheated out of our eye-teeth?"

"Ah, yes, but it is not pleasant to think that we really had no chance to win," and Del Santo resumed his seat.

"My dear Del Santo, let us be honest in this matter. Would not either you or I been glad of a chance to skin this fellow in any way, shape or manner, and would we hesitate to have rung in a cold deal on him if we had been expert enough to work the trick?"

The Mexican caressed his chin with his hand for a moment, then a cunning expression crept into his eyes and then he burst into a laugh.

"You are right!" he exclaimed. "Right for a thousand golden ounces! We would have skinned the fellow, if we could, and we would not have hesitated in regard to the means!"

"Exactly! When such old stagers as you and I talk business, you know, what is the use of beating about the bush," the general remarked.

"Take our little game in regard to this mine, for instance; you surely must admit that we played it extremely low down. The way in which we secured control of the property would not stand inspection."

"That is true," the Mexican replied with a smile full of deep cunning.

"We skinned the Marquis De Belleville in

the first place, and we skinned his creditors, whom we represented, in the second. We succeeded in getting possession of the property without paying twenty-five cents on the dollar for it."

"Yes, it is a fact."

"And so we really have no right to complain if, by hook or crook, the mine is taken away from us."

"It is not pleasant though," the Mexican added, with a shake of the head.

"Well, we all have to take a little medicine sometimes, and even if the dose is bitter the best way is to gulp it down as speedily as possible and say nothing about it."

"Now, with what grace could we go to this Blake and say 'Here! we think you played a sharp game on us and we want our money back!' Would he not laugh in our faces and reply, 'What kind of a game did you play when you got possession of the Red Dragon Mine? What answer would we make?'"

The Mexican shook his head.

"Upon my word, I do not know what reply we could make."

"Why, we could not say anything, of course. We played our game in our way and won. He played his in his way and was equally successful."

"But will we to have submit to be thus disgracefully beaten?" cried Del Santo, his rage again flaming forth as he reflected upon the result of the fight.

"Oh, no, I intend to try and get even with him. I am going to take a leaf out of his book, meet cunning with cunning," Clairborne replied. "It is not my intention, you know, to take any active part in the matter myself. As the Indians say, this fellow's 'medicine' is too big for me, and hereafter I intend to fight him by proxy."

"Yes, that is a good idea."

"And not near as dangerous," the general added. "I am going to send for that Black John, and see if I cannot make some arrangement with him."

"Yes; he seems to be the kind of man who might be able to do something," the Mexican remarked, thoughtfully.

Clairborne summoned his confidential clerk, Billy Gibbons, who was in the inner office.

"Billy, do you know a Mexican chap who answers to the name of Black John? He hangs out at the Mule Pass Saloon, I believe."

"Yes, I know the fellow," the clerk replied.

Gibbons was considerable of a "rounder" when off duty, and had an intimate acquaintance with the saloons of the camp and their frequenters.

"I wish you would see if you can run across him in the town and give him a quiet hint that I would like to have a talk with him up here as soon as possible."

"All right."

Gibbons got his hat.

The clerk was no fool; he knew that there was bad blood between Clairborne and Del Santo on one hand, and the Fresh of Frisco on the other, and suspecting that Black John was nothing more or less than a Mexican desperado, he had an idea why Clairborne wanted to see him.

"I say, general, did you hear about how this man, Blake, cleaned out Smiling Mickey, who runs the chuck-a-luck game, last night?" he asked.

"No."

"Oh, he skinned him in the worst kind of way, and Mickey swears that he did not get a fair show, either, although he is puzzled to explain how it was that the sport managed to beat him at his own game."

"This Blake is away up at the head as a sharp, as we know to our cost—eh, Del Santo?"

"Oh, yes—curse him!" the Mexican replied.

"Now the idea came to me that if Smiling Mickey were gently egged on—a little encouraged, you know, that he might be induced to tackle the Sport in an endeavor to get square with him," Gibbons explained.

"Very likely! I should not be at all surprised if the thing could be worked," exclaimed Clairborne, catching eagerly at the idea. "Suppose you ask Smiling Mickey to take a walk up here and see me. You can tell him that I and the Sport are at loggerheads, and that there may be a chance to hatch up something to upset Blake's apple-cart."

"All right; I will do it. I have to go right by Smiling Mickey's place, and I will have a talk with him. I know that he was very hot in the collar this morning, and I don't think that it would take much urging to get him on the war-path."

"Do the best you can," the general said.

"Oh, yes, you can depend upon me," Gibbons asserted, and then he took his departure.

"Billy is a smart fellow, and I have no doubt he will be able to work Smiling Mickey up so we can do something with him," Clairborne said. "And if we cannot, we have Black John to fall back on."

CHAPTER XL.

THE BARGAIN.

THE conspirators did not have to wait long for Gibbons's return.

He was back inside of half an hour.

"Well, general, I am sorry to be obliged to report that I have not been able to do much," he remarked as he entered.

"How is that?" Clairborne asked. "It is not often that you slip up, Billy."

"Well, I did not make the rifle this time," the clerk replied, as he helped himself to a chair. "I saw Smiling Mickey first, and sounded him in regard to how he felt toward Blake, and as I expected, he was furiously angry."

"Aha! he wants to damage the Sport, eh?" exclaimed Clairborne, rubbing his hands together briskly.

"Yes, he would like to damage him, first rate, if the trick could be worked so that he could do the job without incurring any risk himself."

"Yes, I see," Clairborne observed, thoughtfully. "Few men who would not like to get a whack at their enemies if it could be arranged in that way, eh, Del Santo?"

"Yes, yes; but it is not an easy matter to arrange it after that fashion."

"And when I suggested to Smiling Mickey that he should come up and see you, as you did not feel friendly toward Blake, and some arrangement might be made whereby the Sport could be brought to grief, he did not cotton to the idea at all."

"Didn't, eh?" the general exclaimed.

"Not at all! 'Oh, no,' said he, 'I am not going to go into any scheme against this devil of a Blake. I am no fool, and I always know when I get enough. He got away with my money, beat me out of my eye-teeth, right at my own game, and how he did it I have not got through my head yet, but I am not idiot enough to stack up against such a man as this Sport, when it comes to a fight, for I am not ready to be planted yet. Mexican Joe tried that game, and I reckon now that he is sorry enough that he did not let the Sport get away with the money that he won, without his trying to get satisfaction for it,' and that is all I could get out of the man."

"Smiling Mickey does not want to be counted in then?" the general remarked.

"Not in any game against Blake. He has a wholesome fear of the Sport, and I don't believe you could get him to attack Blake, no matter what inducement or backing was offered."

"You see, Del Santo, what reputation does for a man," Clairborne observed. "Blake has made a name as a warrior, and his fame is so great that even a reckless desperado, like this Smiling Mickey, hesitates to attack him."

"Well, Blake is a good man; there is no doubt about that," the Mexican observed.

"How about Black John?" the general asked.

"I was not able to find him, but I left word that I wanted to see him," Gibbons replied. "I thought that if anything happened hereafter it would be as well that your name should not be used."

"That was right. I am glad to see that you were prudent enough to look ahead," Clairborne remarked. "I have had all the trouble I want with Blake, and I am not anxious to give him another chance to haul me over the coals."

"No, no, we do not want to have anything more to do with him!" Del Santo asserted.

Just then Gibbons happened to look through the window.

"Hello! there is an old saying, talk of the devil and he appears!" the clerk cried. "We were speaking of Black John, and here he comes up the road."

He probably got your message and came immediately," the general remarked. "No doubt he has a suspicion as to what is in the wind."

"I should not be surprised, for this Black John impresses me as being a decidedly sharp fellow. If you hav'n't anything more for me to do I will get out, as I want to see if I can't scare up a little game along the trail."

"Nothing more; much obliged, Billy."

The clerk nodded and disappeared by the back door as Black John made his appearance by the front one.

"How are ye? take a chair," said the general.

Black John helped himself to a seat, cast a rapid glance around with his sharp eyes, and then said:

"I was told in the camp that Mr. Gibbons, your clerk, left word that he wanted to see me, so I come up, for I suppose that it meant that you wanted me."

"Yes, that is the idea."

"I suppose so, and I think I can guess what you want."

"Did you hear about our little affair with this Sport, Blake, last night?" Clairborne asked.

"Oh, yes, it is the talk of the camp to-day; nothing else is spoken of."

"Well, I reckon that it would kick up a big sensation," Clairborne observed.

"The Sport was on the war-path last night, as these miners say," Black John continued. "Before he came into your poker game at the hotel he visited all the principal gambling places in the camp, and succeeded in clearing all of them out, with the exception of the State of Texas saloon, and there he nearly broke the bank, and, undoubtedly, would have done so, if they had not begged off."

"Well, I should say that I *did* go on the war-path!" the general exclaimed. "And he managed to make Rome howl too!"

"It was a mystery to me where he got the money which he bet so freely at the poker table, Clairborne continued; "he slung out his ducats as recklessly as though he had a National bank at his back."

"It was the money that he had won around town," Black John explained.

"Yes, I understand now. The fellow must have been playing on big luck, as the saying is, and he wound up the night's performance by clearing out the poker party."

"He does seem to be very lucky," Black John remarked, reflectively.

"Lucky!" Del Santo exclaimed. "I never saw such a fellow for luck in all my experience!"

"But there is an old saying, you know, 'that the pitcher which goes often to the well will be broken at last,'" Black John observed with a dark and significant look.

"Well, the fortunes of this man, Blake, have certainly been at the high-water mark for some time now," the general replied.

"And is it not time, then, that the ebb came?" Black John demanded.

"It certainly seems so!" Clairborne assented.

"Yes, yes, the ebb should come now!" Del Santo exclaimed.

"I am so satisfied that soon there will come a break in his good luck that I am willing to bet you a thousand dollars on it!" Black John declared.

"A thousand dollars?" Clairborne exclaimed, a little astonished at the magnitude of the sum.

"Yes, a thousand dollars!" Black John responded, firmly. "I have a pard who will join me in the bet, so that if we win it will only be five hundred apiece."

Clairborne consulted Del Santo with his eyes.

"Take the bet!" exclaimed the Mexican lawyer. "I will join you and take half of it."

"All right! we will take up your banter and bet you that no break in his good luck comes to Jackson Blake."

"It is agreed then, and, gentlemen, you will lose your money before the world is four and twenty hours older!" Black John declared.

"So soon?" the general asked.

"Yes, Blake's star of fortune is on the wane, and soon it will be obscured by the clouds of adversity."

"Well, I sincerely hope so, and it is about time, too, that his career of success came to an end," the general observed.

"Do you know where he is now?" Black John asked.

"No, he was here about half an hour ago, and put the screws on us in a way that was decidedly unpleasant, eh Del Santo?" Clairborne exclaimed.

"Yes, the infernal scoundrel!" the other responded. "It would rejoice my heart to know that he had been swept from the earth!"

"He is now at the hotel, holding an interview with Miss Catalina, probably relating to her how he succeeded in triumphing over you two gentlemen," Black John remarked.

"It is his turn to-day, but it may be ours tomorrow!" Clairborne declared, with an angry frown.

"Ah, yes, it is a long lane that has no turning," Black John responded. "And life is so uncertain in this fleeting world of ours that we can never tell what the next moment may bring forth," and with the remark the Mexican rose to depart.

"Remember! we are ready to pay the thousand dollars on demand the very moment the bet is won!" the general declared.

"Yes, we will gladly pay it too!" Del Santo assented.

"Oh, that is all right! I shall come to claim it before you expect me, I think," Black John replied, with a dark smile, and then he departed.

A few hundred yards down the trail the bruiser, Kid Mitchel, was waiting for him.

The two walked on together.

Black John related the particulars of his interview with the lawyers, and then, when the pair came to where the Chinese trail split off from the main road they turned aside, took the narrow trail, and went up in the foot-hills toward the Wildcat Mine.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST STROKE.

"Now we must stow away these documents in some safe place," the Fresh remarked, when the two pards were again on their homeward road. This was some three hours after they left the mine and the intervening time they had spent in the town.

"I think I will make a *cache* in the mine somewhere, and use it in lieu of a safe."

"That is a good idea," Dave Ringwood observed. "But I say, Blake, you did not have as much trouble in this matter as I expected."

"Well, the lawyers in this case were like Captain Scott's coon," the Fresh replied. "When they discovered what kind of a man was after them, and how he proposed to shoot, they were

willing to come down. If I had not been able to get the deadwood on them in the worst kind of way they would have been sure to have made a terrible fight."

"But I say, don't you think that they will try to get back on you in some way?" the other asked. "Do you think they will be satisfied to allow the matter to remain the way it is?"

"Well, I don't know," the Fresh replied, slowly and reflectively. "You have give me a pretty difficult conundrum to solve. As far as the mine is concerned, the fight is ended now, although they are in possession of the property and have not given it up to me yet. Still, that is only a mere form, for I can take possession at any time."

"Yes, unless they should raise an army and try to hold on to the property by main force," Dave Ringwood suggested.

"I do not think that they will be apt to try anything of that kind for it is a game that two can play at, and from the taste they have already had of my quality I fancy they will not be easily led to believe that either one of them can hope to beat me in a good, square fight."

"That is true enough; the only question is, will these lawyers be wise enough to understand that the odds are big against them?"

"Oh, yes, I think so; both Clairborne and Del Santo are old stagers; the probabilities are great that they have been mixed in a dozen matters of this kind, and they ought to be able to calculate the chances; they are no greenhorn tenderfeet, you know. If this place was within easy reach of Tombstone where the general could get plenty of men willing to back his quarrel, the situation would be different; but, as it is, all the advantage is on my side, and I think these men are wise enough to understand it."

"Yes, it would seem so."

By this time the two men were within sight of the Wildcat Mine, and the trail at this point passed through a particularly wild bit of country; rocks, ledges and giant boulders abounded.

Then, abruptly, from behind a huge rock, not thirty feet away, arose two men; both had revolvers out and they leveled the weapons full at the pards.

The new-comers were no strangers to Blake and Ringwood, for one was the Mexican, Black John, and the other the bruiser, Kid Mitchel.

The spot for the ambushade had been selected with excellent judgment, for it was the only place on the trail where such a surprise could be worked.

The Fresh in the course of his stormy career of adventure had faced death many a time but never had the grim king of terrors come nearer to him than at present.

Just as soon as the men appeared they opened fire; there was a delay of a moment or two, of course, for it was necessary for them to take aim.

And that slight delay saved the lives of the two sports.

Although taken at a complete disadvantage, neither one of the pards had any idea of standing tamely still to be shot down in cold blood, and they skipped nimbly to one side, drawing their weapons as they did so.

The movement undoubtedly saved their lives, for they jumped just as the assassins opened fire, and the result was that Kid Mitchel, who had selected Dave Ringwood for a target, missed him by a couple of inches, and Black John only succeeded in sending a bullet through the fleshy part of Blake's left shoulder, a slight wound, not more than a scratch.

It was the only chance the ambushed villains had to damage the men whom they meant to kill, for sports like the two pards were wonderfully quick on the trigger, and they returned the fire of their enemies so quickly that their shots seemed like the echoes of the first discharges.

And the bullets of the two pards went home too—neither shot was wasted.

Kid Mitchel was hit in the chest and pitched forward on his face, like a man who was not long for this world.

The Mexican was shot through the lungs, and though he made a desperate effort to keep on his feet and fire another bullet, yet he was too hard hit to accomplish the feat, and slowly sunk to the ground.

The pards waited for a moment, in order to be sure that the battle was ended, but when the revolver dropped from the hands of the wounded men it was plain there was no more fight in the assassins.

"This was a narrow shave, Dave, but we managed to pull through," the Fresh observed.

"A miss is as good as a mile, you know," the other replied.

Then the pards approached the prostrate men.

Kid Mitchel was insensible, but the Mexican looked up and scowled in their faces.

Although it was evident that his wound was dangerous, probably fatal, yet Black John's senses had not been affected.

"You have Satan's own luck!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"It is plainly to be seen that you have not, or else you would not have made such a failure of this job," Blake remarked.

"You must be the devil himself, since it seems impossible to kill you!" the wounded man declared.

The Fresh had been closely studying the face of the other.

"You are no stranger to me!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "I recognize you now, in spite of the alteration that you have made in your appearance; you are the man who called himself the Marquis de Belleville."

"You are right, I am that man."

"Well, it seems to me that you made a big mistake in coming back to this camp; you managed to get off, and if you had been wise you would have staid away."

"I thirsted for vengeance upon you," the Frenchman replied, for the supposed Mexican was indeed the adventurer who as the Marquis de Belleville had once lorded it over the mining-camp.

"It would have been better for you if you had not tried to satisfy that vengeance," the Fresh observed, "for the attempt has cost you your life."

"Bah! I am not afraid to die!" the wounded man cried scornfully, his breath beginning to come thick and hard. "All I regret is that I did not succeed in carrying you along the dark road with me, but your star is a lucky one. Even the girl, Catalina, is weak enough to love you, although she is not sure that you did not kill her father."

"I don't believe there is a drop of the Escobedo blood within her veins!" Blake declared.

"You are right, there is not. On the threshold of the other world I will speak the truth. Manuel was jilted by the mother and in revenge he stole Catalina. Her folks are rich Texans. I have notified them of her existence, and they will soon come to take her away from you; I—," and then his utterance became choked, he gasped, beat the air with his hands for a moment, and then, fell back dead.

Our story is told.

The lawyers did not attempt to make any trouble, and Blake took possession of the mine. He had saved Catalina's property. Despite the dying words of the Frenchman, no one came to claim the girl, and the wooing of her champion was not interrupted.

And so once again in the haven of peace, triumphant over his enemies, we leave our hero, bold Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

THE END.

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